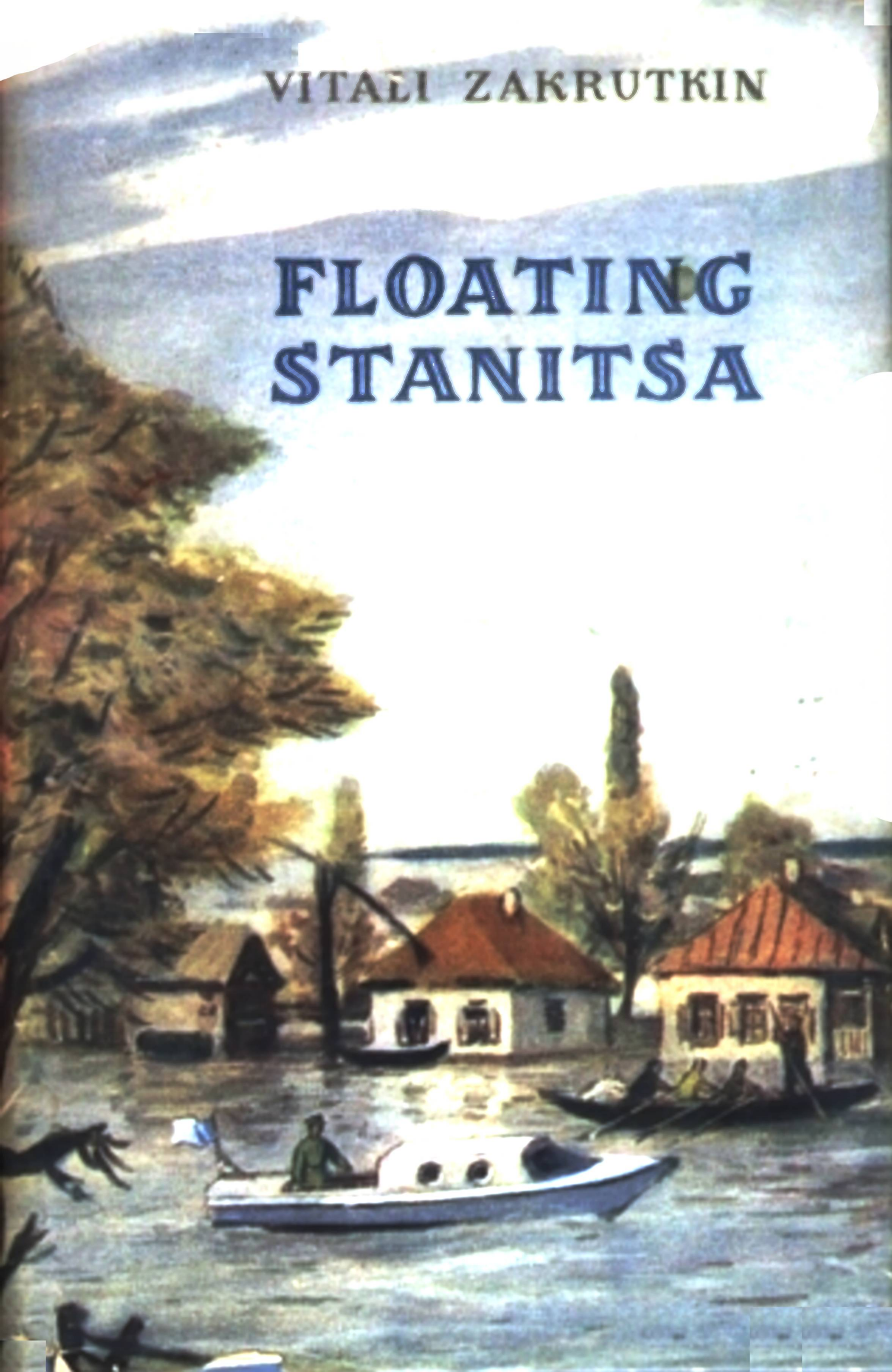


VITALI ZAKRUTKIN

FLOATING STANITSA



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FLOATING STANITSA

STALIN PRIZE

1950

ВИТАЛИЙ ЗАКРУТКИН

ПЛОВУЧАЯ СТАНИЦА



ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО
ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
Москва 1954

VITALI ZAKRUTKIN

FLOATING STANITSA

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CHAPTER ONE

1

A wintry sun shone hazily over the white hills. After a brief thaw the stinging frosts had drawn an icy film over the snow, and the whole steppe glowed cold and yellowish.

A solitary sled struggled up the hill, picking its way between tall snow-capped ricks. The shaggy chestnut mares, their sweating, heaving flanks touched by hoarfrost, stumbled, snorting, through the deep snow.

In the sled sat the driver, a burly old man in a great sheepskin coat, and a slim youth clad in a sheepskin jacket and a grey astrakhan cap which still bore the impress of an army star.

The travellers did not speak for quite a time. Not until they had rounded the hill, and the purple smoke of the distant mines was hidden from view, did the old man turn his head, muffled up in a woman's shawl, to inquire gruffly:

"How are you getting on there, not frozen yet?"

"A bit," the youth confessed. "I think I'll take a little run."

"Go ahead," the old man said with a faint sneer. "In those boots of yours you'll be an icicle by the time we get to the stanitsa."

The young man jumped off the sled, clapped his hands and stamped his feet, and when the mares, on reaching the crest of the hill, broke into a trot, he ran after the sled. The horses slowed down after a while, and the old driver, keeping his lagging companion within sight, started to hum a drawn-out song.

"Inspector!" he growled, looking back over his shoulder. "Call that an inspector! The milk hasn't dried on his lips yet. Our fellows here have dealt with tougher customers."

Vasili Zubov, whom the old man was driving from the railway station, had been appointed district inspector of fisheries and was now on his way to Golubovskaya Stanitsa to take up his duties. After graduating from the fishery school he had contracted pneumonia and had been laid up in hospital for a long time. He had not been able to leave for his place of work until the winter.

"Well, feeling warmer?" the old man said when Zubov, his face flushed with the exercise, jumped into the sled.

"Yes," Vasili answered with a cheerful smile. "I thought I was done for."

He glanced at the driver's rime-coated moustache and his huge rubber high-boot dangling over the side.

"Don't you feel cold in those boots?"

"Cold? Not likely. I've got about a pood of hay stuffed inside them," the old man said.

"What's your name, by the way?" Vasili said, settling himself comfortably in the sled.

"On my birth certificate it's Yerofei Sazonov," the old man replied unwillingly, "but if you was to ask for me by that name no one in the stanitsa would know who you want."

"Why?" Vasili said in surprise.

"Because I've got a local name, a nickname."

"What is it?"

The old man flicked his whip carelessly.

"A stupid name."

"Let's hear it."

"They call me Shrimp," the old man said with a scowl. "Grandpa Shrimp...."

Vasili, glancing at the burly figure of the driver, could not help laughing. The latter shouted at the mares and turned to him.

"Someone goes and makes up a crazy name and it sticks to a man."

"What made them give you a nickname like that?" Vasili said, trying to conceal his amusement.

The old man slipped the reins under his knee, pulled off his mittens, lighted a cigarette, and spat over the side.

"You'll hear all about that in the stanitsa," he growled.

He was obviously loath to pursue the subject.

"So you've been appointed inspector here?" he said, eyeing his companion askance.

"Yes."

"Where do you hail from?"

Vasili moved up closer to the old man.

"I'm from town. My mother teaches school there. I joined a fishery school in 'forty-five, after I was demobbed. Went straight into the second course—I finished the first before the war."

"What did you say your name was?"

"Zubov, Vasili Kirillovich."

Grandpa Shrimp nodded approval. "Aha! But when did you manage to serve in the army? You don't look more than twenty."

"I'm twenty-three," Vasili said, reddening. "I volunteered in 'forty-two, Grandpa. I was sixteen at the time. Had to add on a couple of years, or they wouldn't have taken me."

They were silent for a while.

The horses, snorting and settling back on their haunches, carefully descended the steep hill. Below, the trees, the roofs of farm-houses, and haystacks stood out darkly, and still lower, round the bend of a frozen rivulet, lay a flat stretch of snow-white flood lands. Far out on the horizon, through the bluish frost haze, glimmered the faint outlines of a broad ice-bound river.

The sun had dipped low over the earth, and the whole flood meadow was bathed in the glow of its slanting rays. Houses appeared on either side and dogs began to bark.

"This is Vinogradny," the old man said, pointing to the hamlet.

"And how far is it to Golubovskaya?" Vasili asked.

"About seven miles."

In a few minutes they had passed the hamlet, crossed a plantation of young trees buried in snow-drifts, and swept out on to a smooth level road. Grandpa Shrimp, his nose buried in the shawl, swayed from side to side swearing mechanically at the stumbling mares.

Bits of snow shot out from under the flying hoofs and struck Vasili painfully in the face. He turned his head aside, breathed on his cold hands, and gazed at the purple shadows on the twilit flood meadow.

"There it is, our floating stanitsa!" cried the old man, pointing his whip over to the left.

"Why floating?" Zubov asked, peering at a long row of poplars.

"You'll see for yourself when spring comes. The whole place is flooded. We sail about the streets in boats. Our villagers live out their lives on the water."

Shrimp grunted and slapped Zubov on the shoulder with his mitten.

"Feeling cold?"

"Frozen," Vasili answered

"D'you drink vodka?"

"No, I don't."

"You don't?" The old man sounded incredulous.

"No, Grandpa."

Shrimp surveyed him critically from head to foot, and shrugged his shoulders with a scornful smile.

"You'll have a tough job, then, and you'll be a difficult man for our fishers to deal with."

He reined in the horses and added somewhat drily:

"I'll take you down to Marfa Panteleyevna's. She's my daughter-in-law, the wife of my son who was killed in the war. They've fixed lodgings up for you there. Stepan Ivanovich—that's the inspector who was fired last autumn—he used to lodge there too."

It was almost night when they reached the stanitsa. The tall houses, rime-covered trees, and wattle fences loomed darkly in the bluish snow. The sled passed the kolkhoz yard, turned down a lane, and drew up at the end house which nestled on a knoll overlooking the river.

Grandpa Shrimp helped Zubov with his luggage, and turning to a woman who had appeared in the doorway, he said:

"Here's your lodger, Marfa."

Vasili shyly tipped the old man, wished him good night, and picking up the heavy travelling bags, followed the woman into the house. His teeth were chattering and his feet were numb. Marfa showed him into the kitchen and opened the door to an adjoining little room.

"Take your things off," she said amiably. "I'll light the lamp and heat the stove up in a minute. You must be chilled to the marrow."

Vasili took his things off and sat down on a stool, chafing his hands.

Marfa came in with a lighted lamp. She regarded her guest with unconcealed curiosity. Her glance slid

over his thin boyish neck, his cheeks, ruddy from the frost, and she laughed softly.

"We're going to have quite a young inspector, not at all like Stepan Ivanovich," she said.

Placing the lamp on the table, she began to bustle round the stove with a clatter of saucepans, and went on speaking without looking at Vasili, as if she were alone in the room.

"I'll make you some tea. Nothing like a cup of hot tea in this kind of weather. We'll heat the other stove for the night, too—it'll be warmer. If you like we can send to the chairman for some liquor. The fishermen here get a ration of it in winter. . . ."

"Don't bother about the liquor," Vasili said. "I wouldn't mind a cup of tea, though."

While Vasili sat at the table drinking the hot tea, the woman stood by the stove with her hands behind her back, talking in a quiet voice.

"My husband was hit in the head just when the army got to Berlin. He got his discharge when he left hospital. Lived at home for seven months, and then died of brain disease—haemorrhage they call it. So I was left alone with my son Vitya. He's getting on for fifteen. I'm at work all day—I'm in the net team. My boy hasn't finished school yet, he's in the seventh form, and he works in the kolkhoz, too. So that's how we live. . . ."

Vasili listened to his talkative landlady and played with a brindled cat that sat on a stool, but the warmth made him feel drowsy and he kept glancing at the door through which he could see a comfortable-looking bed.

"You'd better go to bed," Marfa suddenly checked herself. "You must feel properly chilled after your journey, and I'm keeping you here with my talk."

He thanked her, took the lamp, and went into the room that had been prepared for him. It was an ordinary Cossack room with photographs on the walls, a high

chest in the corner, and a table covered with a clean blue cloth.

"This will be your room—that is, if you like it," said Marfa. "If you don't, the chairman will find you some other lodgings."

"Thanks, I like it very much," Vasili said shyly.

"Well, good night. I have to sit up for my night-prowler. I suppose he's still sitting over his books at the library."

She went out, shutting the door after her.

Vasili slipped off his belt, took his pistol out of the holster and put it under the pillow, pulled off his boots, undressed swiftly, and got into bed.

"You may take the lamp!" he called out to Marfa.

"That's all right, I'll take it later on," she answered.

The tin oil-lamp threw a dim light on the edge of the table-cloth, the flowers on the window-sill, and a dark icon hanging in the corner. The moonlight, filtering through the frosted little window, traced a pale-blue path on the floor. Somewhere down the street a dog barked, then someone passed with a crunch of heavy boots on the hard-packed snow.

Vasili shut his eyes. So it had begun at last, the life he had been looking forward to so eagerly. The roads of war, the years of school-life, the boisterous disputes in the students' hostel—all these were now things of the past. To-morrow Vasili Zubov was starting a new life.

"I wonder what it's going to be like," he mused.

His thoughts went back to his last conversation with Bardin, the Chief of the Fisheries Trust, who had signed his appointment to the district inspectorate. "Mind, Zubov," Bardin had said, "you are being appointed to a difficult district. At school they taught you everything from ichthyology and pisciculture to colloidal chemistry, but on the river you'll find from the very outset that this

is by no means all you've got to know. Your real examination will come on the river, remember that."

"All right, Comrade Bardin, I'll try and pass that exam too," Vasili thought.

2

In the morning Vasili unpacked his suit-cases, and laid out on the table his books, underwear, writing materials, razor, cigarettes, pencils, and paper-cases.

He arranged all this in the table-drawers, on the window-sills, and on a bamboo book-stand. Then he sewed a clean neck-band to the collar of his tunic, and rolling up the sleeves of his night-shirt, went out into the kitchen.

Marfa and her son Vitya, a fair-haired, freckle-faced youngster, were standing over a bowl, peeling corn-cobs for the fowls. They greeted him affably and bestirred themselves to prepare the wash-stand for him. The boy hastened to fill it with water out of the bucket, while his mother ran out to fetch a clean towel.

"Please don't bother," Vasili said to her, "I have everything I need."

It was only now in the light of day that he had a really good look at his landlady. She was a fair, rosy-cheeked woman with a high bust, grey eyes, and small, thin hands that were never at rest. She wore a work-blouse tucked into a short skirt, a blue kerchief, and slippers on her bare feet.

As he soaped his neck Vasili repeated with an awkward shy smile: "Don't trouble yourself, really. I've brought all I need."

"That's all right, don't worry," Marfa interrupted him. "Wash yourself and have your breakfast. Some men have been asking for you."

"What men?" Vasili said, surprised.

"The under-inspector of fisheries and the leader of the second fishing team."

"The under-inspector is just the man I want," Vasili said. "So far he's the only assistant I have in the stanitsa and I depend on him to show me the ropes."

Marfa exchanged glances with her son and laughed.

"He'll show you the ropes all right," she said significantly.

"Where is he?" Vasili asked.

"Who?"

"The under-inspector."

"Oh, I sent them away, him and that team-leader," Marfa confessed. "I told them you were resting after your journey. They said they would drop in again later on."

Vasili ate his breakfast, had a chat with Vitya, and was just enjoying his first pull at a cigarette when the dog barked in the yard, and two men came in. One was a burly clean-shaven man in a white tarpaulin mac, the other a short puny man in a shabby army great-coat, a sheepskin cap with ear-flaps, and rubber waders.

They greeted Vasili, one taking him in with a swift appraising look, the other with a timid glance, and doffed their caps.

"We've come to see you, Comrade Inspector," said the man in the white tarpaulin in a deep-chested husky voice. "I'm Pimen Gavrilovich Talalayev, leader of the second fishing team, and this is your assistant, under-inspector of fisheries, Prokhorov, Ivan Nikanorovich."

"Glad to meet you," Vasili said, rising. "My name's Vasili Kirillovich Zubov. Take a seat, Comrades."

Talayev and Prokhorov sat down, the former confidently and heavily, drawing a creaking protest from the chair, the latter perching himself on the edge of a stool.

The under-inspector claimed all Vasili's attention, and the more closely he studied him the less he liked

him. Prokhorov sat with stooped shoulders, nervously fingering the cap on his knees. Occasionally he looked up at Vasili with light, vacuous eyes, but on meeting his glance, hung his head guiltily, sighed, and turned away.

"A pretty assistant, by the looks of him," Vasili thought. "Neither fish nor fowl."

"Well, how are things here, Comrades?" he said, addressing Prokhorov.

The man stirred uneasily in his chair, glanced at Talalayev, and twisted his lips into a polite smile.

"Not bad, Vasili Kirillovich, not bad at all. The kolhoz fulfilled its plan for the year by October, we saved over thirty million fry during the summer, close-seasons are strictly observed, and I go over my beat every day, so——"

Vasili tossed his head and drummed with his fingers on the table.

"Are there many poachers here?" he asked sharply.

Prokhorov threw another glance at the team-leader and spread his hands in a deprecatory gesture.

"There are bound to be some, Vasili Kirillovich."

"You haven't answered my question," Vasili insisted.

Talalayev smiled and pulled up the tops of his leather boots.

"There are poachers everywhere, Comrade Inspector," he said. "We have our share of them, too. The kids lark about with their casting-nets early of a morning, and maybe some war cripple will land a couple of pounds of herring or so with a scoop. That's about all the poaching you have round here."

He shrugged his shoulders and went on in a booming mocking voice:

"A poacher doesn't stand a dog's chance these days, Comrade Inspector, not under the Soviet Government. They've been done away with as a class, chucked overboard. In the old days there used to be fishing pirates

who'd run out as far as the bay in their row-boats and ketches, and start a regular fight with the *Pikhra*,* machine-guns and all, and sink each other in the river. Now those were poachers!"

With a scornful gesture Talalayev continued:

"But nowadays when some little squirt tries to do the trick with a rag of a net, Ivan Nikanorovich just fines him three rubles and writes out a receipt. And that's all your poaching."

He became grave and added impressively: "The kolhoz fisherman doesn't see any sense in cheating himself and trying to hoodwink the authorities. These are different times, Comrade Inspector. The river is socialist property now, same as the land. Who is fool enough to rob his own workers' and peasants' state?"

The team-leader spoke in the patronizing tone of an older man lecturing a callow youth.

Marfa took no part in the conversation. She sat on the bed, knitting mittens. The ball of grey wool rolled about on the earthen floor as she deftly plied the needles, and with a smile hovering on her lips she secretly watched the men.

"All right," said Vasili, "we'll see about that. Better tell me about the fishing kolhoz, Pimen Gavrilovich. I'll have a talk with Ivan Nikanorovich later on."

Talayev rolled himself a cigarette with his thick fingers and said with a smirk:

"What's there to tell? Our fishery isn't big, nothing like those in the stanitsas downstream. Just two seine teams and a women's net team. Grandpa Shrimp runs that team—he's your landlady's father-in-law. We have a fleet of sorts—about half a dozen row-boats, launches, and wherries. The fishing-grounds are rotten—flooded

* Name given to the river police by Cossack fishermen in tsarist Russia.—*Tr.*

every year and have to be cleaned every blessed spring. There's one decent spot, though, on the underside of the lock, but you inspector fellows chase us away from there—it's out of bounds. Well, what else can I say? We have a transport team to deliver the fish to the curing-shop. And there's the subsidiary farm, of course."

"What sort of people have you got here?"

"Just ordinary people. Our chairman's Kuzma Fedorovich Mosolov—he was a sergeant in a tank unit during the war. Not a local man, but a decent chap; the fishermen respect him. The leader of the first team is Arkhip Ivanovich Antropov. Everyone knows him hereabouts. He was a partisan in the Civil War—knocked about the steppes with the Red commander—Podtelkov."

"He's just been elected Party Secretary of the fishery," Prokhorov put in timidly. "Party member since 1918. A flinty chap."

"What d'you mean?"

"Hard as nails. Bad-tempered fellow, very difficult to get on with. Doesn't care a straw for the people in authority, pokes his nose in everywhere, likes to order people about, and you daren't say a word to him—flies off the handle...."

"How does his team work?" Vasili asked.

Prokhorov glanced at Talalayev.

"Not bad, same as the others," Talalayev said, knitting his brows. "It did a hundred and three per cent of the plan."

"And yours?"

"My team's holding the lead," Talalayev said with solemn dignity. "Knocked off a hundred and thirty per cent. Got a commendation from the regional authorities."

Marfa laughed, and Talalayev, glancing back at her, flinched.

"What's the matter? Ain't it true?"

"Who said it wasn't?" the woman answered evasively. "Isn't your picture on show in the club?"

Vasili could see that the woman knew more than she cared to say. He looked at her questioningly, but she went out of the room without a word.

"Did you have a good trip, Comrade Inspector?" Talalayev said.

"Yes, thanks. It was pretty cold, but your Grandpa Shrimp drove me down from the station in no time."

"We've brought you a little fresh fish, Comrade Inspector," Talalayev said, half rising from his chair. "Choice breams. They're nice and fat now. We left them in the passage—have them put away before the dogs get at them."

Vasili flushed and waved his hand protestingly. "Oh, no, Comrades! I can't take them!"

"What d'you mean, you can't?" Talalayev said, looking surprised. "You're a new man here, you've got to eat and drink until you settle down. It isn't stolen fish, and the river won't be any the poorer. This is your own property, in a manner of speaking, so why shouldn't you——"

"No, no," Vasili interrupted him impatiently. "Take it away, I don't need it."

Talalayev got up and buttoned his padded jacket and tarpaulin.

"That's too bad, Comrade Inspector," he said in a grieved tone, "you're insulting the fishermen. Maybe you think this lousy fish is a bribe to get on the right side of you? They meant no harm, they only wanted to please you, and you go and offend them. It isn't right."

"Oh, all right, Pimen Gavrilovich, leave the fish," Vasili said with a bad grace. "Thanks. But please tell the fishermen, those who sent the fish, not to do it again. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I have my own rules in these matters. You understand me?"

The visitors rose.

"All right, Vasili Kirillovich," Prokhorov said meekly. "Don't be angry with us. Since you don't like it, it won't happen again."

They took leave of Zubov and went out.

Marfa, who saw them out, slammed the door behind them, then busied herself at the stove. Glancing at Vasili's coat, which he had just put on, she said with a smile:

"Wait a minute, I'll brush your back, it's all covered with chalk."

She began to brush his coat, then coming round to the front, she looked up at him and said: "I shouldn't trust those fellows too much."

"Why not?"

Marfa tossed the brush on to the kitchen cupboard.

"Because Pimen Talalayev is a bad lot, and as for your assistant, Prokhorov, he's not a bad fellow, but he has no backbone—anyone can twist him round his finger."

"Well, I'll get to know them all in good time I dare say," said Vasili. "Thanks for the tip."

He asked his landlady where he could find the chairman of the fishing kolkhoz, then put on his gloves, and went out.

It was a still, frosty morning. New telegraph-poles stood glittering with hoar-frost along the fences, their wires feathery with snow. The smoke from the tall stannitsa chimneys rose into the sky straight as candles. School children, their faces glowing from the frost, ran down the street swinging their satchels. Women muffled up in shawls carried ice-encrusted buckets of water on yokes. They stopped upon seeing Zubov and sedately made way for him, following him with curious eyes and gossiping in low tones.

"Who's that?"

"The new inspector, I believe. He arrived yesterday."

"They've put him up at Marfa Sazonova's place."

"He's terribly young, isn't he?"

"Looks like he's going down to see the chairman."

The chairman of the fishing kolkhoz, Kuzma Fedorovich Mosolov, a thick-set man of forty, sat in the office waiting impatiently for the new inspector. His disabled left arm hung in a sling, and he was wearing, as usual, his army jacket and breeches, and chrome-leather high-boots. He never took off his decorations, of which he had quite a number—the Order of Lenin, two Orders of the Red Banner, the Order of the Patriotic War, and five medals.

The impatience bordering on anxiety with which Mosolov waited the inspector had its reasons.

The relations he had established with Likhachov, the former inspector, had been such as to give the chairman almost unrestricted control of the river. Mosolov had taken full advantage of this. Being an honest man, he never took a single fish for himself, but whenever there was a hitch with plan fulfilment, he would go to Likhachov and arrange with him to send one or two teams out to the places where fishing was generally prohibited.

"We deliver all the fish to the state, every ounce of it. We are fulfilling the state plan," Mosolov would argue in such cases. "So I don't see that it matters where we catch it."

Likhachov's dismissal had altered the situation, and the manager felt very uneasy about it.

When he received the telegram from the Fisheries Trust notifying him of Zubov's appointment, Mosolov made arrangements about his lodging with Marfa and sent Grandpa Shrimp down to the station to meet him. Early the next morning the old man had called on the chairman.

Mosolov, lifting his heavy, close-cropped head, nodded to the old man and asked, "Well?"

"I've brought him, Kuzma Fedorovich," Shrimp said non-committally.

Mosolov scratched the bridge of his nose with his pencil.

"Is he young?"

"Quite a youngster, one might say," the old man had reported. "But he served in the army and has decorations, if I'm not mistaken."

The old man stole a glance at the chairman's decorations, and coughing into his fist, went on: "He's a bachelor, I think, and his mother's a school-teacher in town. Hadn't much luggage to speak of—just a suit-case, a kit-bag, and a blanket, that's all."

Mosolov twitched his bushy eyebrows and inquired: "Did he ask about the fishery?"

"No, he asked mostly about myself—what my name was, how I got the nickname."

The chairman dismissed Shrimp, shifted the ink-well on his desk absent-mindedly, warmed his back at the iron stove, and then took to pacing up and down the room with his good arm thrust in his pocket.

"If he turns out to be a bureaucrat, I'll have no end of trouble with him," he thought. "He'll either start finding fault because we overfish on fry, or count the close-season to the day and hour, or start fining the team-leaders and measuring the meshes in every net with an inch rule. Anyone on the look-out for faults can find thousands of them at any fishery."

When Vasili came into the room and introduced himself, Mosolov swiftly took stock of him, from the Cossack cap of grey astrakhan to the toes of his immaculate high-boots. The chairman made a mental note of the various points which seemed to him to indicate the new-comer's firmness of character—the neat-fitting sheepskin jacket,

smart suède gloves, the burnished buckle of his officer's belt, and the sharp, slightly hoarse voice. Zubov looked rather young, but the scar on the forehead—the mark of a bullet wound—indicated that the new inspector had been through the mill.

"No," the chairman decided, "this is not Stepan Ivanovich. He's not one to be trifled with, by the looks of him."

"Welcome, Comrade Inspector," the chairman greeted him affably. "Sit down, make yourself at home. Better take your coat off—it's rather warm in here. If there's anything we're short of, it's not fire-wood."

"Don't trouble, I'm quite comfortable," Vasili answered. "I was looking for the Secretary of the Party organization. I have to register."

Mosolov looked out of the window.

"He'll be here on the dot in half an hour. I don't know, though, whether you'll be able to talk to him. He's going out to the Donets with the fishermen. His team has set a weir-net there, and they have to go and check it."

Eyeing each other from time to time, they carried on a desultory conversation, praised the weather, inquired about each other's service in the army, fell to reminiscing about the battle of Korsun-Shevchenkovsky, the fights on the bastions of Küstrin, and the memorable assault of Berlin. Mosolov grew animated. He paced up and down the room and touched Zubov once or twice on the shoulder.

But as soon as Vasili started to ask him questions concerning the nature and methods of fishing and the relations between the fishery and the former inspector and broached the subject of fishery regulations, the chairman parried his questions with a laugh.

"You'll see for yourself when the spring comes, Vasili Kirillovich," he said. "You know what our job is like, one can't provide against everything. Regulations are all

very well, but the state wants its fish, and the catch plan's got to be fulfilled at all costs."

Vasili looked hard into the square face of the chairman and took him up discreetly but firmly.

"Not at all costs, Kuzma Fedorovich. That's where you're wrong. If we start fulfilling the plan on those lines, the state will have no fish left to-morrow."

"I don't mean wasteful methods of fishing, of course," Mosolov said with a smile. "What I mean is we must abide by the spirit and not the letter of the law. I don't have to tell you that even Marxism is not a dogma with us but a guide to action. And Marxism is more important than your fishing regulations. Which only goes to show that the regulations can't be regarded as a dead letter either."

"Smart fellow," Vasili thought. "Has the gift of the gab! But you wait, my dear chap! I'll make you stick to regulations when the spring season begins."

Mosolov, with a glance at the window, turned to Vasili. "You were asking after the Secretary, I believe. Here's his sledge."

Vasili wanted to speak to Antropov, but the latter was in a hurry to go down to the river where under-ice fishing was going on. Vasili had but a glimpse of the thick-set figure of the Party Secretary sitting in the sledge. The hood of the tarpaulin which Antropov wore over his jacket hid his face.

He gave Zubov a tanned, heavy hand and said: "Sorry. See you afterwards. Call on my assistant, he'll see to your registration. I want to have a long talk with you later on."

He pulled on a pair of fur-lined mittens and flicked the whip. The wiry chestnuts, quivering and baring their teeth, jerked free the sledge-runners which had frozen to the ground and started off down the street at a brisk trot.

Golubovskaya Stanitsa, the headquarters of the district fishery inspection, stood on the broad flood lands between four rivers—the Don, the Northern Donets, the Dry Donets, and the rivulet Barsovka.

Just above its confluence with the Barsovka the Don was spanned by a dam. Late in the autumn the dam's metal girders were stacked flatwise and installed again after the spring flood to check the head of the water and regulate its flow until the next autumn. Under the bluff of the left bank was the lock-chamber through which steamers, barges, and launches passed during the navigation season.

Every spring, when the flood waters came down from the upper reaches of the Don, the whole valley as far as the Donets hills was inundated for miles around. The small low-lying lakes, streams, creeks, bushes and trees—everything that stood in the path of the wild torrent—disappeared under the water. On such days fishing-boats scurried about the village streets and the villagers sat out the flood indoors.

All the stanitsa houses, therefore, consisted of two stories—the stone ground-floors, where the cellars and summer kitchens were usually housed, and the wooden superstructure, containing the living-rooms, where the tenants took refuge during the flood.

Vasili Zubov, his coat thrown over his shoulders, sauntered about the stanitsa streets all day, admiring the snow-clad poplars and chatting with the villagers. He went down to the bank of the Barsovka and inspected the fishery yard in the middle of which freshly tarred sharp-nosed boats stood on trestles.

Shortly after Vasili's arrival the frost began to abate. There was a light snowfall, and the thawed snow, trickling down the roofs, dripped from the spiky icicles.

Under-inspector Prokhorov showed Vasili about the stanitsa, walking behind him at a respectful distance and studying his tall figure in the sheepskin jacket and with the yellow holster as if hoping to find some clue to his new chief's character.

He told Zubov that there was a motor boat in the yard belonging to the fishery inspection and that it was in need of repairs—the engine had given trouble the previous autumn.

"That's all the property we have here, Vasili Kirillovich," he said. "There's a carbine and a hundred cartridges listed in my name, but I haven't used any of them."

"Tell me, Ivan Nikanorovich," Zubov said, when they came out to the river, "what sort of man was my predecessor, Likhachov, and why was he dismissed?"

Prokhorov hesitated, shrugged his shoulders, and coughed.

"Oh, I don't know.... He wasn't a bad chap really, knew his business, and was pretty fair in his dealings with the kolkhoz. True, he was fond of a drink, and—well, you know——"

"What?"

"Well, he used to sell a bit of fish on the market once in a while. Not himself, of course. His wife, Lukeria, handled that part of the business. But that's not the point."

"What is, then?" Vasili asked, stopping.

Prokhorov brushed the snow off a log with the skirt of his bedraggled great-coat and said with an ingratiating smile: "Let's sit down, Vasili Kirillovich. I'll acquaint you with the situation, although it's not for me to tell you this—but never mind...."

They sat down on the log. The under-inspector politely declined the proffered cigarette, rolled one for himself, and went on half-heartedly:

"My own daughter's at the bottom of it all, Vasili Kirillovich. I have a girl, an only child. Grunya's her name, that's to say Agrafena—Agrafena Prokhorova. Well, this Grunya of mine is working here in the fishery as pisciculturist. Her mother, that's to say my wife, has been dead for many years now, and so Grunya since 'forty-one grew up like a wild weed by the roadside. She finished the seven-year school, then spent a year in town at the pisciculture courses for kolkhoz fishermen. She joined the Komsomol while she was there. When she finished the courses they sent her back to work in our kolkhoz.

"We thought she would make good—that's to say, Stepan Ivanovich, the inspector, and I did. As a matter of fact it was he who arranged for her to go to town and attend the courses. She returned him thanks, all right——"

"What happened?" Vasili asked with interest.

"Just you listen. After Grunya got her appointment here my life became hell. She's only eighteen, but that girl never sits at home. All she knows, summer and winter, is to wander about the steppe and woods with a gun."

"What gun?"

"Just an ordinary shot-gun. They went and awarded her a double-barrelled gun at the courses—of all the crazy ideas! A prize for excellent progress. The lads there offered her to swap it for some feminine article—a length of silk for a dress, stylish shoes—or even an accordion—but not she! 'I got this as a reward,' she says, 'and I'm going to keep it.'"

"Well!" laughed Vasili.

"As I was saying, she came back, and the first thing she did was to start bullying the chairman. 'All you care about is to catch fish,' she says, 'but you don't give a thought to saving the fry. We must organize a special team for saving the young fish and for breeding fish

artificially,' she says, 'so as to restock the natural waters.' Well, the chairman went and organized that team for her. You'd think, now, that ought to keep her quiet. But no, she starts demanding oxen for transportation and funds for buying this, that, and the other. She hangs about the lakes all day long, carting fry to the Don, or taking pot-shots at the ducks, and when evening comes, off she goes to a meeting or to the district centre and makes things hot for Stepan Ivanovich."

"But why?"

"Oh, for all sorts of reasons," Prokhorov said wryly. "She nagged the man to death, she did, made his life a nightmare. Can you imagine it—she accused him of being mixed up with the poachers, then she wrote to the District Party Committee that the inspector was allowing the teams to fish in the closed areas and was taking bribes from them for it."

"Did he really do that?" Vasili asked, frowning.

"Not likely! The kolkhoz folks may have done a bit of fishing in the closed areas once or twice, but you can't blame the inspector for that. He hasn't got a dozen legs to be everywhere at once."

"Well?"

Prokhorov paused and glanced at Vasili out of the corner of his eye.

"You see, it's like this. . . . If it was just Grunya alone, no one would've taken any notice of the silly way she carried on. But the trouble is she's not the only one now. She started to stir up trouble, and then the others came along and helped. We have a fellow here, Arkhip Antropov—the one we were telling you about this morning. Well, he started to pick holes in Stepan Ivanovich's coat, too, and there was a devil of a to-do, I can tell you. All kinds of committees of investigation started coming down, and the chief of the Fisheries Trust himself turned up with inspectors from the regional centre. By the

autumn Stepan Ivanovich's goose was cooked. Ruined the man's career for nothing at all."

While listening with interest to what the under-inspector was telling him, Vasili from time to time glanced at his puny figure, sunken cheeks, faded eyes and puffy eyelids with a mingled feeling of pity and contempt.

"Are you ill, Ivan Nikanorovich?" he asked sympathetically.

"What makes you ask?" Prokhorov said, on his guard. He was afraid that Zubov would bring up the question of his dismissal. "Twenty years on a job like this is enough to take it out of any man."

The under-inspector frowned, and for the first time looked Zubov straight in the face.

"My lungs are bad," he said with an apologetic smile. "The woman doctor down at the district hospital said it was consumption. 'Your lungs are affected, Comrade Prokhorov,' she says. 'You need medical treatment.' "

"There, you see," Vasili said. "And you're neglecting your health. Does your daughter live with you? Does she help you? Maybe you've quarrelled?"

"No, why?" Prokhorov said in a hurt tone. "After all, she's my child, and I'm fond of her. She lives with me in a rented cottage—we haven't built one of our own yet—looks after me, of course, I can't complain. Cooks the dinner, does the washing, and tidies up the rooms. But I must say, she and I don't see eye to eye on many things. She goes her way, and I go mine, that's how it is."

Vasili took his leave of the under-inspector on the corner of the street and stood for a while on the knoll watching the youngsters tobogganing down the hill before he went home.

He walked down a riverside lane, shrouded with snow, watching the flight of the ruffled magpies and listening to their incessant chatter.

His talk with Prokhorov had left him with a vague

feeling of uneasiness, and he thought of the difficult life that lay ahead of him in this big stanitsa hidden away among the four rivers, the life he had so often thought about while in school and of which apparently he knew so little.

It was quite dark by the time Vasili got home. Maria was out. Vitya was sitting by the stove, making a wire trap. He got up when Vasili came in and drew up a stool for him.

"Sit down," he said amiably. "I'm making a hare-trap. All you've got to do is to find the hare's trail and fix this gadget on it. The hare will run its head straight into this little noose, and there you are."

He looked at Vasili with mischievous light eyes—the colour of his mother's—and lowering his voice, added: "I've got four hare and two polecat skins hidden away. I'm collecting them for the agent. Maybe I'll have enough by the spring."

"What agent?" Vasili asked absent-mindedly.

"The one who gives you a gun in exchange for skins. He's the Purveying Trust man. He gives you a single-barrelled Izhevsk gun for a hundred and seventy rubles' worth of skins, and you can choose which gun you like. Most of the folks in our team are collecting skins, but the only one who has a gun is the team-leader—Grunya Prokhorova."

"Does she do any shooting?"

"You bet!" Vitya said, growing animated. "Last summer when we were salvaging the fry out at Swan Lake and the creeks, there wasn't a day when Grunya would come back to the stanitsa without a duck. If it wasn't a pochard, it was a teal. Once she shot a greylag at Silt Lake, a whopper. It was a beautiful goose with a fine beak and a white patch just above it. All the girls in the stanitsa make fun of Grunya, but she doesn't care a pin!"

Vitya went on chattering, and Vasili felt sleepy.

"Where is your mother?" he said, yawning.

"She's on duty at the office," the boy said. "She said you should eat some fish when you came home. Maybe you'd like some milk? I'll fetch it."

"Bring it in," Vasili said, stretching himself. "We'll have supper and go to bed—I've got a busy day to-morrow. I want to go over my area."

He drank two mugs of cold milk, lit a cigarette, and went into his room.

The uneasiness he had felt after his talk with the under-inspector did not leave him. He tossed about in bed for a long time, smoking incessantly, and finally said to himself irritably: "All right, Comrade Zubov. Time will show. If you have a head on your shoulders you'll choose the right course...."

4

The inspection area was not an easy one. It ran along both banks of the river for more than eleven miles, from the islands of the sandy delta of the Northern Donets down the Don as far as the sharp bend where the river turned southwards.

The spot that had to be most carefully watched for poachers was the zone of the Golubovskaya dam. The huge sluice-gates and metal girders of the dam, which were mounted every year after the flood water had passed, divided the river into two isolated sections. The passage of the fish upstream was thus cut short at the dam, and masses of herring, razor-fish, bream, pike-perch, sheat-fish and sturgeon collected there every spring. The poachers came here after easy gain with every available means of capture—bag-nets, scoop-nets, landing-nets, seines, rod and reel—anything, in short, that could snatch the fish out of the water, which, at this spot, was like a seething cauldron.

It was the duty of the fishery inspection officer to give strict attention to the protection of the fish at this dangerous point of its mass accumulation in the vicinity of the dam. For this purpose the under-inspector Prokhorov had his post here.

In addition to this, Zubov's area contained dozens of flood meadow lakes north of Golubovskaya, including Big Swan Lake, Little Swan Lake, Petrovskoye, Kuzhnoye, Silt Lake, and Round Lake, and hundreds of small tributaries of the Don and the Donets. When the spring freshets passed, these lakes were cut off from the river, and a multitude of fishes was left stranded in them. Most important of all, these lakes, isolated from the river, contained millions of fish fry, which were doomed to death when the lakes dried up in the summer. It was the fishery inspector's duty to preserve the stocks of fish in the lakes and see that timely measures were taken to save the young, which were transferred to the river by means of channels cut through the dense reeds by a special fishermen's team. The fry were also fished out of the lakes and transported to the river in barrels.

Vasili, with a padded jacket thrown over his shoulders and his father's old shot-gun, roamed about the snow-blanketed rivers and lakes for four days, inspecting his district, which was ice-bound until the spring.

The snow lay white and smooth on the frozen surface of the river and on its steep banks. Only where the fishermen had set under-ice snares did Vasili see bluish blocks of ice thrown up on the snow, stakes sticking out in the ice, and footprints. Flocks of hungry crows and fussy, chattering magpies circled over the holes in the ice.

A lane of open water showed dark above the dismantled lock under the high left bluff. In the stillness Vasili heard the distant splash of water against the icy edges. Wintering pochards flew over the open water.

Vasili skirted the lane of water, admiring the sport of the pochards, then climbed up the bank and stopped outside the empty hut of the buoy-keeper. The hut was buried in snow right up to its little windows. Rusty anchors and wooden buoy-rests lay piled together on one side, and lower down a beached boat lay upon the path.

Vasili sat down on an anchor and lighted a cigarette. The monotonous tapping of an axe sounded from the depths of the woods on the right. Higher up, from somewhere behind, came the lazy shouts of a carter: "Hey . . . he-e-ey!" These muffled sounds accentuated the deathly stillness of the wintry river, and Vasili, as he listened to them, felt a surge of warm happiness fill his heart. He could not account for this joyous feeling, but he felt a sudden wild impulse to dash down the steep bank with a whoop, plunge headlong into a snow-drift, then race along the smooth surface of the frozen river, flying on and on to where the white earth met the low, purple-tinted sky.

A flock of pochards flew low overhead. Unaware of the presence of a man by the hut, the birds alighted on the edge of the water lane, strung out in single file, and swam downstream in the wake of their leader.

The hunting instinct awoke in Vasili. He cocked his gun, waiting until the pochards flocked together in the middle of the open patch, and was about to pull the trigger when he heard an unfamiliar voice behind him: "Don't waste your shot on that trash! There's better game to be had."

A broad-shouldered young man with high cheekbones, wearing a black pea-jacket and a fur Kuban cap, sprang down from a knoll, grazing an icy willow bush as he did so and bringing a shower of snow down upon Vasili. A short single-barrelled gun dangled on his chest the way tommy-guns were carried in the army.

"What game?" Vasili said, rather annoyed.

"Wolves!" the boy said breathlessly. "They've been

playing the devil lately in the stanitsa. The place has been simply swarming with them since the war. Last November they killed two foals in the horse herd, and the other night they broke into the sheep pens at the Victory Kolkhoz and killed thirty sheep."

The boy paused for breath, then rattled on again, swallowing his words.

"Grandpa Shrimp spotted them yesterday down at Salt Dell, a whole pack of them, he says, prowling about in the reed-grass. Our hunters went out at daybreak to beat them up. I'm heading there, too. Would you like to come along?"

Evidently it dawned on him that Zubov did not know him, for he suddenly added: "I'm a fisher from Talalayev's team. My name's Stepan Khudyakov. I'll take you right down to the spot, you needn't worry."

Zubov rose and touched his cartridge-belt.

"All right, let's go. But I haven't any buck-shot, just two cartridges loaded with swan-shot, and weakly charged at that."

"Oh, that's all right," Stepan said, "someone's sure to have extra cartridges. I believe Arkhip Ivanovich's gun is the same calibre as yours."

They ran down the steep bank and made their way along the frozen river, skirting the boarded-up little house of the jetty and leaving the stanitsa far to the right.

"We'll get there quicker by the short cut," Stepan explained. "It isn't more than two miles to Salt Dell."

Passing the old river-bed, they helped each other up the steep icy bank, and skirting a narrow forest cutting, strode down the smooth snow-carpeted flood meadow. Vasilii saw the dark little figures of skiers moving about in the snow far ahead.

"That's our Komsomol boys flagging the wolves," Stepan said, peering into the distance. "They've been tying little flags on strings these last three days, and soaking

them in kerosene. The wolves are afraid of the flags and won't go over them for anything in the world."

Stepan marched smartly in step with Vasili, soldier-fashion, furtively studying his face and talking volubly as they went.

"So you've come here to stay? That's good. It's high time they sent a new man down here. Our kolkhoz members are hard-working folk, but what's the use. Bad management. That's why plan fulfilment with us is just eye-wash."

"How's that?" Vasili said, becoming alert.

Stepan kicked aside a faggot which someone had dropped on the smooth-trodden path.

"I'll give you an example. Suppose our second team gets a quarterly quota to land fifty tons of fish and deliver it to the curing-shop. Now suppose we deliver those fifty tons down to the last ounce. It would look as if we'd fulfilled the quarterly plan, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose so."

"But you ought to see the kind of fish goes into those fifty tons. It's delivered by weight, you know. Well, you'll find we turn in all kinds of rubbish, small fry like bleaks, gudgeons, and what not. Or else we catch anchovies and small herrings in the sea and fulfil the plan with that trash. What's more, we fish out the young of the marketable fishes without restriction."

Vasili was staggered by what he heard.

"Taking your yearly catch as a whole," he said tentatively, "how much of this low-grade fry would you say it contained?"

"More than half," Stepan flung out.

"Whe-ew!" Zubov whistled and eyed his companion doubtfully. "And how does the cannery pay the kolkhoz for such catches?"

"They pay us the regular rates, of course. It varies for the different kinds of fish. But that doesn't make it

any better for the state. The state expects high-grade fish from us—carp, bream, sturgeon—and we turn in all sorts of rubbish, and consider that we've fulfilled our plan."

They were approaching Salt Dell—a broad snowy flood meadow over which men were moving, and Vasili, touching Stepan's sleeve, said: "Tell me, Comrade Khudyakov, how do you account for this sort of thing?"

"The fish is running low in the river, that's how."

"Why?"

"Opinions differ. . . ." Stepan tilted his cap back and went on:

"Our team-leader, for instance, blames it on natural causes. Either the river's too shallow, or an upstream wind blows all through the spring, or else the fishes don't breed well. If you ask me, the water and the wind have got nothing to do with it—it's our own fault. We reap what we sow. The trouble is we treat the fishing business like a game of rummy—if the right card turns up, all very well; if it doesn't, we're out of luck."

He looked as if he wanted to say something more, but at that moment they heard the angry shout of Antropov who was coming towards them.

"What are you dawdling for, friends? Take up your positions! The beaters will soon raise a din and drive the wolves out of the rushes."

Salt Dell, the place where the battue was to be started, lay in the low part of the flood meadow. It stretched for some two miles, one end bringing up at the old river-bed, overgrown with pussy-willows, the other running into the straight line of lakeside rushes looming darkly on the horizon. According to Grandpa Shrimp, the wolf pack was lying among the rushes now hidden by snow. The beaters had gone out early in the morning to surround the rushes. They were to beat the wolves out of cover by shouting, banging, and whistling, and head

them towards the willow thickets where the hunters had taken up positions.

To prevent the wolves from sheering off to the left or right, young men on skis had flagged off the whole of Salt Dell. Strings of coloured flags, soaked in kerosene, fluttered from the weeds and bushes.

When Zubov and Stepan Khudyakov came up to the thickets, Arkhip Antropov, who was master of the hunt, was completing the final preparations. The marksmen stood round him in a huddled group. Among them Zubov noticed a girl. She had evidently just run up and was still panting.

"That must be my assistant's daughter," Zubov thought.

Dressed in a quilted jacket and padded trousers, with a fur cap tilted to the back of her head, the girl stood next to a thick willow stump, holding her gun across her shoulder the way women carry a yoke.

Zubov glanced at her out of the corner of his eye.

Her straight ash-blond hair, with not even a curl at the ends, escaped from under her cap and fell to her shoulders. Little beads of perspiration stood out on her smooth high forehead. Zubov did not care much for her slightly turned-up nose and small pouting mouth, but her eyes were arresting. They were grey-blue, the colour of river water, and looked almost dark, while their glance was slow, rather compelling and heavy.

The girl looked at Zubov with undisguised curiosity, but when she caught him looking at her, frowned and turned away.

"You'll be number one, Grunya," Antropov said. "Stand under that willow-tree—you'll be on our left flank. You go after her, Stepan—you'll be number two."

He paused, laying his hand on Zubov's gun.

"You'll be number three, Comrade Inspector, and I'll stand in the middle on your right hand."

Zubov was about to tell him that he had no buck-shot, but Antropov had already led the four other marksmen off towards the willow-bordered bend of the river.

Vasili was left by himself. He saw Stepan Khudyakov stamp down the snow and lie down some fifty yards to his left, while still farther Grunya leaned against the gnarled trunk of an old willow. Antropov took up a position on the right, disappearing over the hummocky brow of the steep bank. Vasili looked around him, and loaded his gun. Then he trampled down the dry weeds and dropped to his knees, leaning his shoulder against the burnt, hollow stump.

There was a deep stillness all round. A lowering sky hung over the white flood meadow. A stinging wind drove the snow over the ground, forming eddies on the hillocks and covering up the hunters' footprints. A pungent, bitterish odour of frost-touched willow bark was wafted up from the thickets, and from somewhere down below among the riverside brakes came a faint smell of burning.

"It's wonderful!" Vasili murmured.

In the distance, faintly etched against the sky, glimmered the pale-blue strip of the rushes, and beyond them, wrapped in the whitish murk of a bleak wintry day, loomed a ridge of hills, dotted with the dark patches of hamlets, wooded ravines, and towering straw-stacks capped with snow.

"Wonderful!" Vasili repeated.

He glanced at the black dots of little flags and smiled. "Just a waste of time," he thought. "An old wolf will jump the flags, and the cubs will follow him and get away."

He longed for a smoke, but the wind carried up to him the distant shouts of men.

"It's started," he thought with a thrill.

Heedless of the cold, he pulled off his gloves, tossed them on the snow, and laid his gun across his knee.

There was no sign of either men or wolves, but the discordant shouting of the beaters drew nearer and one could already distinguish their voices. "But where are the wolves?" Vasili wondered. He peered out into the white pall of the meadow until his eyes ached and noted every dark speck in the snow—here the dry stem of a burdock plant sticking out of the drift, there the greyish-red crest of wormwood, tufts of tumble-weed dancing in the wind, and a finger-post at the wayside.

Suddenly Vasili saw four wolves loping along unhurriedly down the left line of flags. They stopped every now and then, looked back, and pricking up their ears, listened to the shouts of the beaters behind them.

A big she-wolf ran in front. The wind, blowing from behind, ruffled her grizzled shaggy coat. Glancing askance at the fluttering flags, she tossed her head and led the pack towards the bank.

Immediately behind her ran two gawky, big-headed yearlings. They did not seem to be aware of the danger and jostled each other playfully. Kicking up their paws, they darted forward at a gallop and, when the she-wolf snarled at them, dropped obediently into a loping trot.

Lagging slightly behind came a lame old wolf. He hobbled along in short jerks. His unkempt dun-coloured coat hung from him in shreds, and his tail, covered with burs, was pressed close to his pendulous haunches as though he were crouching for a spring.

The pack headed straight for the willow under which Grunya was standing.

Vasili felt a warm throb of excitement. "She'll shoot before they come within range and miss," he thought in alarm, measuring the distance with his eyes. The she-wolf was about seventy paces from the willow. Suddenly she stopped in her tracks. Her back bristled; she sniffed the air nervously and backed away, hustling the yearlings who huddled behind her.

Vasili felt rather than saw the girl, standing by the willow, level her gun.

"She'll miss!" he thought with a shudder.

He waited for the shot, but none came.

He saw the pack swerve off to the right, and realized that the beasts had heard the click of the gun-hammers. The girl's gun had misfired. Vasili caught his breath.

The she-wolf, her head down, took a couple of springs and approached Vasili. She was rushing past him, running hard, and he could see her snarling mouth, lolling tongue, and white fangs.

He threw up his gun and instantly sighted the she-wolf.

Vasili was seized with a curious mingled feeling of wild excitement, ecstasy, and alarm: "What if she gets away?" and unshakeable confidence: "No, she can't get away!"—a feeling known only to the hunter who has a bead on his quarry.

Vasili was now oblivious to all around him but the she-wolf bounding across the snow.

Vasili shifted the barrels slightly to the right and pulled both triggers, one after the other.

Two ear-splitting reports rang out.

The she-wolf leapt into the air, churning the snow underfoot, snapped her teeth, and dropped on her side, her hot muzzle buried in a deep snow-drift. She was up, however, in a flash, and rushing blindly towards Antropov with crimson foam dripping from her tongue. Antropov fired point-blank, and she dropped dead on the very bank.

Stepan killed one of the cubs, and the marksmen at the river bend the other.

Only the lame old wolf got away. He rushed back towards the beaters, leapt over the flag-string at a single bound, and disappeared in a gully overgrown with thistle.

The marksmen came out of their ambush, and the

beaters ran up. Seeing Grunya standing slightly apart with her gun slung over her shoulder, Antropov said kindly to cheer her up: "Don't be upset on account of your gun misfiring, Grunya. That sort of thing can happen to the best hunters. Our inspector here didn't make such a wonderful shot either, just winged the brute."

He winked at Vasili.

"I didn't have any buck-shot," Vasili retorted hotly, glancing at Grunya. "You can't do much with swan-shot."

Grunya looked up. Vasili, toying with his gun-strap, stood beside her flushed and excited, his sheepskin coat thrown open. Meeting his glance, she did not turn away this time, but laughed softly.

"Don't make excuses!"

"My word of honour," Vasili said with a shy smile. "Ask Stepan if you don't believe me."

The beaters dragged the carcasses of the wolves to one spot, covered them up with a tarpaulin, and led out of the thickets a pair of horses harnessed to a low country sledge. The stallions, catching the smell of wolves and blood, snorted and backed away. Their ears laid back savagely, they stamped about nearly smashing the shaft.

"Cover up their eyes!" Grandpa Shrimp shouted.

He strode up to the sledge, scattering the snow with his huge *valenki*, and held the horses' heads together by their bridles while the beaters dumped the carcasses into the sledge.

The sleek horses, quivering and baring their teeth, champed the bits and fell back on their haunches.

"Who's going to drive these wild devils?" said Shrimp. "They'll smash up the sledge!"

"I'll drive them myself," Antropov said.

He sat down in the front, picked up the reins, and turned to Vasili and Grunya.

"If you're not afraid, jump in, but sit tight. But you can wait for the other sledge if you like—it'll be safer."

Grunya looked at Vasili. "Shall we?"

"Yes, of course!" Vasili answered gaily.

They stowed their guns away and sat down in the sledge. The stallions tore off straight across the flood meadow. Vasili moved up closer to the girl, and put his arm about her waist to support her.

"You'll fall off, give me your hand!" he shouted.

She complied and said something he could not catch.

"I don't hear you!" he shouted again.

Grunya brought her face so close to his that a wisp of her hair touched his cheek and he saw white snow-flakes on her dark eye-lashes.

"I said your hand is cold!"

"My gloves are in my pocket, I can't get them out!" he answered.

The sledge lurched on the snow-drifts, lumps of snow shot out from under the hoofs, and trees, bushes, and sign-posts rushed past.

Antropov drove Vasili and Grunya down to the office and reined in the horses with difficulty.

"You'd better get out here. These horses have gone mad," he said in a hoarse voice.

Vasili saw Grunya to the street corner and took his leave of her. She looked back several times, thinking he was doing the same—at least, she very much hoped he would—but Vasili sauntered off whistling, with his gun over his shoulder, and did not glance back at her once.

Upon coming home Grunya laid her gun down on the bunk, took off her quilted jacket, and said to her father, who sat mending his boots: "I've seen the new inspector."

Prokhorov, licking a waxed thread, looked up at his daughter questioningly: "What do you make of him?"

"I don't know," Grunya murmured thoughtfully. "He seems to be a nice chap. But he's so terribly young. Not the kind of man you need here. He won't be able to do anything with you people. You'll have him dancing to

your tune. He won't stand up to you long. He'll find himself in your clutches before he knows where he is."

Prokhorov pulled a wry face.

"What nonsense you talk, Grunya! What tune? Whose clutches? What are we here, crooks?"

He had a fit of coughing and shook his head in reproach.

"A nice chap, you say? He wasn't too nice when Pimen Talalayev and me brought him a dozen fishes the other day as a present. D'you think he took them at once? He wouldn't hear of it! 'I have my own rules in these matters,' he says. We had a job to get him to take them."

Grunya, who was combing her hair, glanced at her father in the looking-glass, and asked with a note of concern in her voice: "But he did take them?"

"Yes. You see, Pimen started shaming him. 'The fishermen only wanted to please you,' he says, 'and you go and insult them.' Well, the man began to feel awkward and finally gave in. 'All right,' he says, 'leave them, but let this be the last time.'"

"He's a rotter, that Pimen of yours," Grunya said bluntly. "That fellow can twist anyone round his finger. He should have been kicked out of the kolkhoz years ago, but he struts about like a hero, gets bonuses, and has his photo published in the papers besides."

Prokhorov prodded the hard sole with his awl and glanced anxiously at his daughter.

"I shouldn't say that, my dear," he muttered. "It's hardly fair. Everyone knows that as soon as the spring fishing starts Pimen is on the river night and day. There isn't a better team-leader in the district. He knows all the fishing places around here. Who was the first to fulfil the plan? Pimen Talalayev. Who pushed the catch this year up to a hundred and thirty per cent? Pimen again."

Grunya stood behind the door, struggling to pull off her wet heavy clothes.

"A hundred and thirty per cent!" she cried, an angry flush spreading over her cheeks. "But how did he get that per cent? By landing under-sized fishes! By delivering fry and passing it off as anchovies! You and Likhachov used to shut your eyes to it, made out you didn't see what was going on, and Pimen went ahead killing off the young fish, robbing the state and fooling the people!"

She came out from behind the door, snapping the stiff press-buttons of her frock.

"You'll get round the new inspector, too, you and that Pimen of yours," she threw out to her subdued father. "We'll see how he'll protect the river against Pimen's fishers, this Zubov, when spring comes. We'll know then whether he's good. All I can see so far is that you're trying to get on the right side of him, trying him out with fish bait to see whether he'll bite or not."

"Oh, let's drop it, daughter," Prokhorov said conciliatingly. "I have an idea Zubov isn't Likhachov. If you ask me, no one will ride him."

"We'll see," Grunya said with a little yawn.

She went into her room, curled herself up on the chest standing by the stove, and became lost in thought. She had a momentary vision of Zubov as she had last seen him at the battue—in his open coat, flushed and smiling shyly.

5

When Vasili Zubov was going out to Golubovskaya Stanitsa, he little thought that anyone would be looking forward to his coming, since he knew none of the villagers and no one knew him. He would have been surprised to learn that everyone in the stanitsa, young and old, looked forward to his arrival. It was not him personally they awaited, of course, but the new inspector of fisheries whose job it was to enforce the fishing regulations along a large stretch of the river.

Grandpa Shrimp had not called Golubovskaya the floating stanitsa for nothing. As soon as the Don was ice-free and the warm waters from the upper reaches flooded the vast meadow, swarms of spawning fishes began their spring migration upstream from the sea and the forking delta of the great river. It had been so since time immemorial, and the villagers, since time immemorial, had spent the spring and summer on the water, catching dozens of tons of fish.

Day and night heavy seine-boats, unwieldy scows, sharp-nosed smacks, and hundreds of nimble wherries scurried over the river.

Fish multiplied and grew big and fat independently of human effort, and so the belief struck root among the villagers that fish was "God's gift" over which men had no power, and therefore any man had the run of the river to do what he pleased there, and to catch as much fish as he wanted and when he wanted. So spake the Golubovskaya ancients, and so they taught their grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

"That's how it is," the villagers argued. "Land is one thing, and water is another. You don't have to till and sow the water. Nature manages here by herself, and all you have to do is to take what she has prepared for you."

Likhachov, the former fishery inspection officer, tried to "keep the rules" as best he could, but he was an easy-going man and was often heard to say that fish husbandry was not to be confused with farming.

"I believe in the maxim—live and let live," Likhachov used to say. "If the kolkhoz makes a catch or two in prohibited grounds to fulfil its plan, or a score of villagers scoop out a little fish below the dam, the state won't be any the poorer for it."

About fifteen of the six hundred households in the stanitsa belonged to people who shirked work in the

fishing kolkhoz and found some kind of job as a blind, while they spent all their time catching fish, which they dried, smoked, or salted, and bartered in the up-country steppes for flour, butter, and wool.

These poachers had worked cheek by jowl with Likhachov, whom they invited home on Saturday evenings and treated to wine and liquor, and he had winked at their doings. Some of the fishermen had tried to complain against Likhachov, but he had "pull," as he himself was fond of boasting, at district headquarters.

"Every God's creature wants to eat and drink," the tipsy inspector would say with a snicker. "And there's nothing like fish for appealing to a man's conscience. You let a fellow fish just once or twice and he'll be your best pal."

The inspector had been repeatedly warned that his actions were being looked into and that the district attorney was keeping an eye on him, but Likhachov airily brushed these warnings aside.

For all his bluster, however, he was eventually recalled to town, relieved of his duties, and prosecuted.

"That's all Arkhip Ivanovich's and Grunya's doings," he had said before going away. "They wrote to the Regional Party Committee about me, complained to the Ministry, discussed me at Party meetings, and dogged my every step. They're glad now, but you wait, some rotter will come down in my place, he'll show them what's what."

The villagers had been waiting for the new inspector throughout the autumn—some with hope, others—Likhachov's old cronies—with unconcealed anxiety, wondering what the new inspector would be like.

As for the new inspector, he did not seem to be in a hurry to show his mettle.

Among the carts and baskets heaped up in the office yard he unearthed the motor boat belonging to the fishery

inspection—a trim-looking, high-powered craft with predatory upcurling bows, slightly curved sides, and a fine keel. The jacketed engine was installed aft. The boat had a roomy cabin built amidships with port-holes on all sides, which contained two cots screwed down to the deck, a console table, and a stool. The black steering-wheel could be seen through the front window.

Vasili walked round the boat, which stood on logs, admiring its elegant design. He brushed the snow off the hull with a twig, examined the bottom, and looked at the engine.

He arranged with Mosolov, the kolkhoz chairman, for a mechanic to be called out from the district motor-fishing station. Two days later the mechanic started repairs on the motor boat. Vasili spent hours in the workshop helping him to take the engine apart, thoroughly cleaning and drying the gleaming pistons, and rummaging in a heap of scrap iron for suitable nuts. At last the repairs were finished. The mechanic, an elderly man, gave the engine a trial run. Pushing his spectacles up, he stood listening to the smooth rhythmic action of the pistons, screwed down the shining white porcelain spark-plugs, and shouted to Vasili as he stroked the roaring motor: "Powerful engine! She'll pull like blazes. A regular torpedo boat!"

Prokhorov, the under-inspector, who had gone to town on business, brought back several tins of paint for Vasili. They dragged the motor boat into an empty shed and decided to paint the hull themselves.

"I'm going to call her the *Sterlet*," Vasili told his assistant, "so we'll have to paint her accordingly—the top a sandy wash, a dash of pink on the sides, and the bottom in some lighter shade."

They spent four days over it, caulking and tarring the bottom, before they started to paint it. With his coat off and the sleeves of his tunic rolled up, Vasili worked in

the shed from morning till night. He mixed the paints, polished the brass rails with a rag, cleaned the thick glass of the port-holes with news-print, and saw to it that Prokhorov put on the paint in a thin, smooth layer.

Now and again fishermen looked in. Crowding in the doorway or squatting on the earthen floor, they smoked *makhorka*, exchanged glances, and dropped an occasional remark addressed to no one in particular.

"The old inspector never used that boat."

"Our chairman used her mostly to make the rounds of the fishing teams."

"A neat little craft."

"Yes, take you anywhere, a boat like that."

"The engine's a roarer! The chairman and me rode about in her for three days at high water, and I was stone-deaf for a week after that."

Grunya came to the shed every day to see her father. She stood silently watching the old man and Vasili at work, biting her pouting lips and absent-mindedly buttoning and unbuttoning her short fur-trimmed jacket; and it seemed to Vasili, when he met her tense glance, that the girl wanted to say something to him; but she never did. She set before her father a bundle with his frugal lunch, waited until he had finished, then gathered up the utensils together and walked away.

Vasili noticed, however, that Grunya always smartened herself up before coming to the shed. She put on her best jacket and a blue serge skirt, and above her neat black *valenki* one had a glimpse of the fine silk stockings encasing the curves of her firm, shapely legs.

One day, when the painting was nearing completion, Grunya glanced at Vasili and burst out laughing.

"What are you laughing at?" he asked, surprised.

"You've got white paint on your nose," the girl said, "and you're getting up your boat as if you intend to take a pleasure cruise in her."

"You're right about the cruise," Vasili said, dropping into the same easy tone, "but I'm not so sure about the pleasure. Some people mightn't find it very pleasant."

Vasili selected a fine brush, picked up a tin of black lacquer, and firmly painted the word *Sterlet* in large letters on the bows.

"*Acipenser ruthenus?*" Grunya murmured as she watched Vasili's hand.

"What?" he said blankly. "Ah, yes! The Latin for *Sterlet*. You're working here as pisciculturist, aren't you?"

The girl sighed and passed her hand over her hair. "It isn't work, it's hell! Our people here think of nothing but fishing. Breeding doesn't concern them. They say there's always been fish in the river and there always will be, so it's no use dabbling with trifles and tearing men away from their main jobs to mess about with fry salvage."

"That reminds me—Stepan Khudyakov told me the other day that the fish stocks are dwindling," Vasili said, rubbing up paint in a clay pot.

Grunya shrugged her shoulders.

"What do they care!"

"Who?"

"The leaders of our kolkhoz. So long as there's fish they take it, if it disappears they'll sit and twiddle their thumbs."

Feeling her steady gaze upon him, Vasili would glance at Grunya now and again while he worked. They talked about the river and the fish, and Vasili, warming to the subject, laid aside his brush.

"We'll put all that on a new footing," he said. "We'll start making a study of the river and fish. Once we get started it will be easier."

After a reflective pause he confessed embarrassedly: "You know, Grunya, I've got a lot to learn yet. I go

about keeping my eyes open and asking the fishermen all sorts of questions. I can see that things are not what they should be in the district, but there's a good deal I don't understand yet. Besides, I'm afraid I won't be able to manage by myself."

Grunya, as she listened to him, suddenly caught herself thinking how nice it would be to take his red chilled hand in hers and warm it.

She looked sadly at her father, dozing in a corner, and murmured: "Father won't be much of a helper to you. He's a weak man...."

"That's all right," Vasili laughed. "We'll brace him up."

"Have a talk with Antropov," Grunya advised him. "He knows everyone here and he'll help you."

"Yes, of course. I've made arrangements to see him."

On one occasion Vasili asked Grunya to bring a needle and thread to hem the boat's pennant.

The *Sterlet*, gleaming with glass and burnished brass fittings, stood on high stays in full trim, with coils of rope smelling of fresh tar and life-belts hanging on her gunwale, and brightly painted boat-hooks lying along the sides.

"All ready for launching!" Vasili cried when he met Grunya.

After an admiring look at the boat, she sat down on a crate by the door, and Vasili laid a white pennant with a red border on her lap.

Hovering snow-flakes could be seen through the open door of the shed. Tall poplars, coated with rime, loomed white across the frozen strip of river.

"It will soon be spring," Vasili said musingly.

He went out, scooped up a handful of snow, and rubbed his paint-smeared hands with it. Coming back, he accidentally pushed Grunya's arm. She gave a low cry and dropped the needle.

"What's the matter?" Vasili asked, startled.

"N-nothing. . . ."

He took her hand and saw a drop of blood on her index-finger.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he muttered. "How clumsy of me! Here, let me——"

"No, don't," Grunya said jerkily, and bent over her sewing with a flaming face.

6

In the middle of February, after a spell of severe frost, a thaw set in, and around the stanitsa houses the earth emerged from under the melting snow. The snow on the river grew dark and slushy. Crows and ravens circled over the river all day long, particularly where the sledge track ran across it.

On the left bank, amid the glades of Poplar Wood and the snowed-up plantation of young trees, the hares set up their mating-time hullabaloo. Standing on the high bluff of the Don one could see hundreds of hare tracks. The little creatures, kicking up the snow, scampered in and out of the woods, doubling back on their tracks, which criss-crossed in all directions, and choosing a favourite spot around some old warted willow-tree, started a merry rough-and-tumble.

Sometimes a lean, hungry fox, with its sharp muzzle to the ground, would follow the maze of hare tracks for hours at a time, egged on by the tantalizing smell of winter-rumpled hare fur, and snatch a hasty meal off some poor little field mouse to the raucous mocking accompaniment of the ubiquitous magpies.

Grunya roamed about the woods with a gun almost every day. She had already learned to read the wise and simple book of wild life, and could unerringly judge by

an animal's spoor whether the creature had been going calmly on its way or rushing along in headlong flight, pursued by a relentless enemy. The faint smell of thawing snow and the young willow bark wafted up from below, the barely audible murmuring and tinkling of the brittle ice-encrusted branches were all familiar to Grunya; but to-day they stirred her as never before.

Lately her thoughts dwelt ever more often upon Vasili. She liked his grey eyes, his warm smile, and his deep strong voice, and felt drawn towards him in spite of herself.

Motion pictures were shown at the fishermen's club on Saturday nights. Before the show began, the sales-clerk of the co-operative store, a war cripple, would lay out his wares on a table that went by the name of "refreshment counter," and dozens of boys and girls would come up for a glass of home-made wine or some sweets.

Vasili hardly ever missed a show. Vitya always ran off to the club first, leaving his mother all by herself. Vasili felt sorry for Marfa and invited her to go with him. She walked primly at his side in a white woolly head scarf, her best coat, stylish shoes, and brand-new, shining galoshes. Vasili escorted her gallantly to her seat, unbuttoned his overcoat, and sat down beside her.

Grunya saw all this and turned away, biting her lips.

"What do I care..." she said to herself.

The club was filled with a hubbub of many voices and the squealing of children, while the imperturbable cinema-operator leisurely adjusted his portable outfit.

Slipping his arm through Marfa's, Vasili piloted her to the refreshment counter. With shining eyes and an embarrassed laugh she would decline wine and daintily munch the sweets he bought her, while he poured himself out a glass of the best spiced wine, held it up to the light, admiring its tawny sparkle, and tossed it off to the health of his landlady.

Grunya heard around her the good-natured whisperings of the fisherwomen.

"Looks like Marfa's getting off with the new inspector."

"She's not one to miss a chance."

"Blooming like a rose, she is, can't tear her eyes off him."

Grunya could not understand why this talk annoyed her and why Vasili's behaviour hurt her and rankled so. Dozens of times she resolved not to go to the club any more so as not to meet Vasili; but every Saturday evening found her dressing up and going there, and even choosing a seat near Vasili and Marfa the better to be able to hear their low-voiced conversation.

Out in the woods she felt calmer. True, during these strolls she had not the least desire to hunt. With her gun slung over her shoulder she wandered through the snow-drifts, stared at the spoors of birds and animals, and lingered among the dense willow thickets.

They were weird thickets. Ancient willows grew all along the left bank, and the spring freshets washed up a multitude of dry plants, silt, and long thread-like weeds. Fierce whirlpools year by year entangled the boles of the willow-trees in a matted skein of plants, and when the spate ran out, it left the willows in rich russet cloaks studded with willow roots. In the winter these cloaks were covered with snow and ice, and thousands of willows towered over the white river like fantastic giants out of fairyland.

Grunya stood leaning against a tree, listening to the faint sounds that scarcely broke the deep silence of the forest—here an icicle breaking off and swishing through the branches to bury itself in the drift, there a black-and-white woodpecker tapping away among the poplars like an industrious woodsman; now the dry rank weeds, buried under the snow, snapped beneath the paw of a

hare crawling out of its hiding-place, now a magpie turned its bluish head from side to side, making guttural noises.

One day, in Poplar Wood, Grunya met Arkhip Antropov, leader of the first fishing team and Secretary of the kolkhoz Party organization. He rarely found time to go out hunting, but whenever there was a moment to spare he would go out into the woods with his gun "for a bit of shooting."

Grunya had liked that man ever since she was a child though she stood in some awe of him. Antropov was broad-shouldered and thick-set. His dark face, the colour of oak bark, his thick beard streaked with grey, the drooping moustache over a strong mouth, and especially his eyes, which were narrow and sharp like steel bores, conveyed a sense of calm, unhurried vitality, a taciturn kind of dignity, and tenacity deeply rooted in mother earth.

Antropov walked slowly, with a rolling gait, and spoke little. His voice was deep and booming. He had spent all the fifty years of his life on the water, sailing the seas and rivers, and when ashore he trod the earth as if it were the deck of a scow rocking on the waves.

Sauntering along the edge of the forest, Arkhip had come across the fresh trail of a fox and followed it all over the bank until he came to the willow thicket where he caught sight of Grunya among the trees. He called out to the girl from afar so as not to frighten her: "Grunya!"

Coming up closer he said kindly: "Hullo, queen of the baby fishes! Listening to the magpie? Has it foretold you anything good?"

"I—er—I was looking for osiers, Arkhip Ivanovich. I want to make some baskets for the team. Spring will soon be here and we haven't any containers. . . ."

"You've chosen the wrong spot," Antropov said with

a smile. "What you want is young withes. This old stuff is no good for baskets."

They walked back together and stopped by the river.

"The river's asleep," Grunya said meditatively. "Look, you can't see or hear anything under the ice."

"No, girlie, the river never sleeps," Antropov said. "It's alive all the time, only people can't see what's going on under the ice."

He got a tin of *makhorka* out of his baggy trousers, rolled and lighted a cigarette, and puffed at it.

"True, the fishes are sleeping now in silt holes and sandy shoals," he continued, looking gravely at Grunya. "They've put on their winter coats of slime and are dozing until the spring. But not all the fishes are asleep. Though it's dark in fishland because of the ice and snow, there are some gay sparks there who make a night of it. You'll find some rudd swimming into the shallows out of deep water, or the ruffs will make a sleepy dash after some game, or a shoal of breams, say, will cruise along their course."

He tapped the ice with his heel and laughed. "The burbots below are honeymooning at this very moment, making the water fairly boil with their antics."

They walked on. Antropov touched Grunya's elbow and asked: "How's your preservation team getting on? All set?"

"Do you call that a team, Arkhip Ivanovich? All the chairman cares about is the plan. Fry preservation to him is just a child's game. He gave me a team of four little boys and four little girls, and I'm supposed to manage with them as best I can."

Antropov's eyes gleamed under his shaggy cap.

"You're right there. We've got used to running things on the river the old way, just taking what it gives us and depending on Mother Nature to do the rest. The collective farmer working on the land has left us far behind. He

doesn't rely on the rain these days, he's become the master of the land—makes his plans for half a century ahead with an eye on the communist future."

Antropov's piercing eyes darkened. "Never mind," he muttered, gazing at the right bank lying hushed under the low February sky. "We'll hit the right trail yet."

After a pause he turned to Grunya and suddenly asked: "You've met the new inspector, haven't you?"

"Yes," Grunya said, blushing. "I've seen him several times."

"What do you think of him? Is he the right sort?"

"I wouldn't know," the girl answered agitatedly. "You ought to know whether he's the right sort or not. What is he to me?"

Antropov's black eyebrow went up and his narrow eyes rested for a moment on the girl's face.

"Hm," he muttered. "He's nothing to me either when it comes to that. Still, the man's worth knowing. He could give you good advice in your work, you know. We all expect a good deal of help from him."

Antropov took leave of Grunya and went to the kolhoz yard where the fishermen were making final preparations for the spring fishing-season—caulking and tarring overturned boats, mending nets laid out on the trampled snow, hewing heavy plummets out of stone, and cutting out wooden floats.

A bonfire was burning in the middle of the yard, and over it stood a cauldron with boiling pitch. The smell of tar, freshly planed boards, and fish-scales hung in the air. There was a mingled sound of rasping-saws, the ringing of axes, and the staccato knocking of hammers.

Pimen Talalayev, his hands smeared all over with pitch, was sitting on one of the overturned boats. He greeted Antropov with a nod and immediately turned away. There was no love lost between the team-leaders, who spoke to one another only when they had to. At the

back of the yard, under a shed, Grandpa Shrimp was busy with some nets. He was surrounded by women at whom he kept shouting for no obvious reason.

Kuzma Mosolov, wearing a tarpaulin and a military cap, sauntered up and down the yard, listening to the brief reports of the fishermen, dropping occasional remarks, and jotting down notes in his greasy note-book.

Antropov was seized with that joyous emotion familiar to old fishermen on the eve of spring, when everyone looks forward to the moment when the fishing-fleet will start out for the grounds and cast its first net in the cold water, still dotted with the blackened ice-floes.

"How goes it?" he said with a smile, giving Mosolov his dark heavy hand. "Getting under way, Comrade Chief?"

"Moving into the firing-line," Mosolov answered in the same tone. "We ought to call a meeting and discuss the catch plans and lots of other business."

"All right," Antropov said. "I've been thinking about that, too."

Weather-beaten and powerful, he stood with his legs planted wide apart, as though hewn out of stone, and gazed at the river.

The snow still lay deep all around. The ice on the river glinted coldly. Nothing seemed to herald the approach of spring. But the wind had shifted and blew now from the south, from the copses of Poplar Wood on the left bank. Early rooks were wheeling over the towering trees on the island, and the snow there, now dark and soggy, began to break out in brown and sandy patches.

Antropov, his nostrils dilated, filled his lungs with the fresh air which smelled of resin and forest roots, and it seemed to him that down there, deep below the river ice, some young vigorous force was stirring and coming to life.

CHAPTER TWO

1

The Quiet Don, so called because of its leisurely current, stretches about one thousand two hundred miles from Lake Ivan to the Sea of Azov. Twisting left and right, it skirts the white pillars of Divnogorye, turns now south, now east, rounds a chain of chalk hills on the right bank, runs into the slopes of the great Volga plateau and, flowing round it, describes a sweeping loop to the south-west.

Dozens of large and small rivers pour their waters into the Quiet Don.

For thousands of years the Don has been flowing into the Sea of Azov, forming alluvial deposits, sand-banks, islands, white spits overgrown with willow bushes, and shoals cropping up from the eternally moving sand of the river-bed. The lowest part of the river-bed, where the river flows in summer and autumn, is called the little bed by the fishermen.

In midsummer, when the water subsides, hundreds of sand-banks and shoals are exposed, and it is only in the backwaters that deep greenish pools can be seen. When the winter frosts set in, the shallow water of the Don freezes. However, no sooner does the sun grow warm than the water begins to rise and spread over the vast flood meadows scattered about the valley on either bank. This is when the fishing-season starts.

With the approach of spring Vasili spent most of his time outdoors. He wandered about his district for days on end and made a round of the villages along the Dry Donets on horseback to establish the future route of the spring breams (shoals of which pass up the Dry Donets to their old spawning-grounds in the Northern Donets every spring).

Vasili saw very little of Marfa. He came home late, when his landlady was asleep, and got up in the morning, when she had already gone to work.

In the morning Marfa would leave him a jug of milk or bake him tasty buns; she did his laundry for him and tidied his room. Vasili had once tried to pay her extra for the trouble, but she angrily refused and was so offended that she did not speak to him after that for several days, although she still attended to his wants and tried to anticipate his every wish.

Vasili went out into the stanitsa every morning. "I must get to know people," he said to himself, "otherwise I'll be groping in the dark."

He inspected the vast yard of the curing-shop with its concrete-built receivers, its stone and wooden vats, refrigerators, and smoke-houses.

Mikhail Stepanovich Golovnev, the manager of the curing-shop, was a short broad-shouldered man with black hair parted on the side and a smooth clean-shaven face. He met Zubov very cordially, showed him over the premises, and told him about the plans for new construction.

The shop was a sort of branch of a fish cannery situated in a distant town. Golovnev's business was to receive the fish from the local kolkhozes and ship it to town after initial treatment in the shop (freezing, salting, and smoking). Acting in the interests of the cannery, Golovnev was chiefly concerned in obtaining high-grade

fish and shipping it off by the cannery's launches as quickly as possible to make room for fresh catches.

Vasili had talks with the old fishermen, visited the lock office on the left bank, and made the acquaintance of the lock master, Engineer Akimenko, who showed him the charts of the river-bed below the lock.

Leaving the lock in the company of Akimenko, Vasili turned his attention to a young man working outside the transformer box. He was a gypsy-complexioned, black-eyed chap with a natty little moustache and an insolent expression on his sunburned face. He followed Zubov with mocking eyes, then laughed and said in a fairly loud tone to his mate, a sickly-looking lad in a pea-jacket: "Seen him? That's the new inspector who's come to take Likhachov's place. He's just a milksop, but look at the airs he's putting on! I bet you he sat the war out behind his mummy's skirt somewhere in Tashkent, and now he's going to show us what a hero he is."

Vasili looked round. The young man stared back with cool defiance and went on with his work as if nothing had happened.

"Who's that dark chap in the overalls?" Vasili asked Akimenko.

"Which one?" the lock master said, looking round. "Oh, that's our electrician, Talalayev. His father's the ferryman, and his uncle's a team-leader in the kolkhoz. They're said to have been rich people in the old days. Owned big orchards on Kostin Hills."

On his way back from the dam Vasili met Antropov by the river. The team-leader was checking weir-nets, and he recognized Vasili from afar.

They had a smoke. Antropov, shifting his weight bear-like from one foot to the other, passed a rough finger over his moustache, and drilling Vasili with his sharp deep-set eyes, said: "Could you drop in and see me this evening? I'd like to have a talk with you."

"Yes, I will," Vasili said. "I wanted to see you myself."

He went in the evening as soon as it was dark. Antropov lived almost on the very edge of the stanitsa in a toy-like little log-house painted with ochre. The yard and the house were spick and span. The Antropovs, who had no children, adopted after the war an orphan girl of nine, whose parents, Starocherkassk fisherfolk, had been killed during the German occupation. They had taken the little girl from a children's home.

When Vasili came in, Antropov's wife and the girl were washing up the dishes, while Antropov sat at the table, reading a newspaper.

"Sit down," he said, drawing up a stool. "America is still playing the fool, thinks she can scare us with that atom bomb. Stringing her toadies up like so many fishes and greasing them with dollars."

He laid the newspaper aside and said to his wife: "Let's have some wine, dear."

He poured himself and his guest a glass of tart red wine, and sat silent for a while, listening to the girl in the next room learning some verses by heart. Then he took a sip from his glass and began to speak quietly, probing Vasili with his eyes.

"We're bungling the job in this kolkhoz, Comrade Zubov. We're a backward fishery. Everyone's beating us fishers—the farmers, the vine-growers, and the cattle-breeders. And why? Because we fisherfolk still look on our job the old way. We're dependent on the river, like invalids drawing a pension—it's all take and no give. I think a fisher should be master on the water, like the farmer is on his land. A Soviet fisherman should *produce* fish as well as catch it. Get me?"

Antropov smoothed down the table-cloth with his strong fingers and went on, looking hard at Vasili.

"The catch on this river is dropping every year.

That's a fact. Now I ask you, why? Because, my dear man, we haven't an eye on the future, we want to reap without having sown. You can't run things this way—not under socialism. I've got an idea that our business ought to be switched over on to new lines and we should tackle the job of producing fish."

Zubov, toying with the fringe of the table-cloth, looked the team-leader in the face. "Have you many poachers here?"

"Poachers?" Antropov queried. "It isn't merely a question of poachers. The thing is——"

"I'd like to know—is there much poaching on the river?" Vasilii interrupted him.

"There are still quite a few people of the kind you call poachers," Antropov, after a moment's thought, said gravely. "Yes, there are. And shall I tell you why? It's because fishing here, ever since folks can remember, has never been regarded as theft. Look what happens, for instance, when some thief steals ten kilogrammes or so of grain from the kolkhoz field—we prosecute him under the law safeguarding socialist property, and teach him a lesson that'll keep him and his grandchildren from ever stealing again. But on the river it's different. Now take Avdei Talalayev and his son Yegor, for instance—they'll go and scoop out half a boatload of herrings or net three thousand rubles' worth of bream and think nothing of it! Folks call it just sport, catching a bit of fish for the table. And the custom has taken root because no one ever put a working hand to the fish. People just look on it as a gift of God, it's there for the taking—no one planted it, so it's nobody's."

"Which Talalayev is that?" Vasilii said, recollecting the swarthy young man he had met at the transformer box.

"Avdei Gavrilovich, the old ferryman. His son Yegor is working at the lock. When Likhachov was inspector

they used to fish night after night and send the catch up to town."

Antropov laid his heavy hand on Vasili's shoulder.

"This can't go on any longer," he said earnestly. "It's time we put this kolkhoz on a new footing. You've heard about Michurin, I suppose? Well then, d'you think that little old man just went in for apples? No, I look at it this way—that man didn't get all that publicity for nothing. He went to the root of things. Right down to the root. He blazed a trail for us with his apples and showed us how to remodel the whole pattern of Nature, so's people should benefit by it. Remember what he said—'We cannot wait for favours from Nature, we must wrest them from her.' "

"Yes," Vasili answered.

"That's just it. And that goes for our fish too."

Antropov's eyes gleamed. He finished his wine, put down the glass, banged the table with his fist, and leaned over to Vasili.

"We've got to *sow* fish, my dear man," he continued in a quiet voice. "Yes, the way the farmer sows wheat. And not just any old kind, but the finest varieties—sturgeon, bream, carp. Sow them and tend them, rear them like a Stakhanovite farm-girl rears her lambs or pigs. We've got to feed them, take stock of them, and keep raising the fish-yield plan year by year. That's what I call socialist fish husbandry. Am I right?"

"You certainly are," Vasili said with a smile. "But from what I can see your kolkhoz has a long way to go yet."

"That's true," Antropov admitted ruefully. "I hear that carp and bream hatcheries have already been organized on the Volga and millions of young fishes are being reared there. But we can't even organize fry preservation properly. We have a pisciculturist here, a young

girl. She's a nice kid, the daughter of your under-inspector. But, of course—you met her at the wolf-hunt and rode home together. Well, anyway, as soon as spring comes she wanders about the flood meadows rescuing the fish fry. We went to the expense of sending her to school, and now when she wants to do her job, we don't help her. Gone and given her a team of boys and left it at that."

"But why don't you help her?" Vasili asked. "Doesn't the preservation of fry concern the Party organization?"

"Of course it does. But we give all our energy to fishing. That's how the district chiefs look at it, too. They demand fulfilment of the catch plan first. All the rest comes after."

He paused, then uttered musingly: "You'll have a hard job on your hands here. And that assistant of yours, frankly speaking, is not quite fit for the job. I'd get rid of him if I were you."

"How did he work under Likhachov?"

"He didn't!" Antropov said with a gesture of contempt. "The fellow's like a willow wand—bends whichever way the wind blows. He was dead afraid of Likhachov and never crossed him in any way. And now he'll be afraid of you. He's a timid little chap, one of those dumb dogs that can't bark. He's not the sort of man you need here!"

"But I can't very well dismiss him for no reason," Vasili protested. "Besides, how will it look? The man's been working in the fishery inspection for twenty years, and suddenly he gets kicked out!"

"Why kick him out? We'll find a job for him. Golovnev needs a weigher at the curing-shop, people are needed everywhere—there are plenty of jobs going. You ought to look out for some good young fisherman, a Communist or a Komsomol member, someone like Stepan Khudyakov, say."

Vasili frowned. "No, Arkhip Ivanovich, I cannot agree to have Prokhorov dismissed. You can't kick men

about like that. And imagine the way people will talk—'He no sooner arrives than he turns everything upside down.' We'd better wait and have a talk with Prokhorov, explain things to him, and tell him what he has to do."

"Well, that's your affair," Antropov said with a shrug. "You're the one who's going to work with him. I'm afraid, though, that one of these days he'll let you down with a bump."

Vasili was rather put out by Antropov's words, but he was sorry for the under-inspector, and said that he still saw no reason for dismissing Prokhorov.

Vasili sat talking with the team-leader until midnight, and when he took his leave Antropov saw him to the gate. Staring at the dark bank of cloud sailing over the river, Antropov said: "Spring is coming. The ice will soon start moving on the river."

He shook hands with Vasili, then added quietly, after a moment's reflection:

"One thing I can tell you, Comrade Zubov. You're a young man, and, it seems, the right sort. You'll probably find it hard here, but your line must be straight and firm. If there's anything I can do for you, or if you, as a Communist, ever need the help of the Party organization, you can depend upon us. We'll stand by you."

Vasili went home through the dark, deserted street. Dogs were barking all over the stanitsa. There were no lights in any of the windows. Water dripped from the roofs. The fresh smell of thawing snow and damp earth rose from the ground.

2

The sun grew steadily warmer, and the ice on the river darkened and became covered with water. The warm underground streams had already begun to flow, and the smooth sheet of ice on the river turned brown and turgid,

with glistening blue puddles along the banks. At night the ice could be heard cracking and splitting, beginning its drift downstream with a low rumble. Very, very slowly the ice-field would start moving, then come to a stop as though meditating, while the water splashed impatiently in the cracks. Then, yielding to the tremendous pressure of the flood, it would start off again, and again come to a stop, crackling softly.

Day and night the fishermen kept watch on the river, waiting for the ice-field to break away from the shore and float freely downstream. They did not want to miss the long-awaited moment for making their first spring catch. As soon as the ice-shift started and the huge ice-floes began to break up with a crash, tumbling over one another, huddling in a confused mass against the banks, and leaving strips of open water behind—this was the moment when the first intrepid fishing-boat would shoot out from the shore and cast its long freshly-tarred seine.

The fishermen, waiting for the signal, stood about on the bank, smoking, cracking jokes, humming songs, and glancing every now and then at the sky and the river. They sat on logs or strolled about in groups of two and three up and down the bank. The seine-boats stood beached and tarred, with the dark nets furled up in them. All around, over Poplar Wood and Oak Grove, over Church Market and Wolves' Gully, the air was filled with noisy rooks and chattering magpies. The rapacious fish-hawk, its white speckled breast gleaming and its sharp wings spread wide, soared over the awakening river.

Antropov's first team and Grandpa Shrimp's net team had been told off for the fishing. Pimen Talalayev's team had been on the left bank since the day before, cleaning the fishery's best grounds at Poplar Wood.

Clad in tarpaulins, sheepskin caps, and with rubber waders strapped to their belts, Talalayev's men stood knee-deep in the icy water, dragging ashore drift-wood,

logs, torn out from under the dam, matted twigs, and other refuse which was washed up by the awakening river and now threatened to tear the nets and interfere with the fishing.

Talalayev lay by the camp-fire on his spread tarpaulin and padded jacket, taking no part in these activities and casting gloomy glances at the right bank. The ice on the river cracked and drifted downstream almost imperceptibly, baring patches of dark cold water. The sun shone and a balmy breeze blew from around the bend in the river.

"The swine!" Talalayev swore, spitting into the fire. "Soon as I win the lead they start shoving me back. They'll do the fishing while I have to do the cleaning."

Poplar Wood commanded an excellent view of the opposite bank. Talalayev could clearly see a team of powerful oxen hauling down to the bank the fishery inspector's motor boat, which gleamed with burnished brass fittings and fresh ash-pink paint. On her slender steel mast fluttered the white pennant of the fishery inspection.

Talalayev flung his unfinished cigarette into the fire and smiled sourly. "The inspector's getting ready for battle. Smart chap, by the looks of him."

His brother and nephew came up unnoticed out of the woods, leaving a hand-sled loaded with fire-wood nearby. They warmed themselves at the fire and smoked.

Avdei Talalayev, the ferryman, a dry, dapper little old fellow, in knitted gloves and white *valenki* with new galoshes, cocked his trimmed, grey little beard, glanced at his brother, and said with a chuckle: "Fishing, Pimen? How many snags have you landed?"

Yegor, the gypsy-looking young man, winked at his father, burst out laughing, and slapped the team-leader on his powerful shoulder. "Never mind, Uncle. Never say die."

Pimen stared at the hot flames of the crackling fire in gloomy silence. He was choking with rage; at that moment he hated everyone—Mosolov, the kolkhoz chairman, Antropov, the leader of the first team, whom he considered his bitterest enemy, Grandpa Shrimp, and even his brother Avdei and his nephew, who had dragged themselves all the way to this accursed fishing-place to poke fun at him.

Avdei seated himself on the edge of the tarpaulin and peered at the right bank with the far-sighted eyes of old age.

"Looks like they're going to launch the motor boat," he said. "Whose is it? The chairman's, I suppose?"

"It was," Yegor said with a flash of white teeth. "Now the new inspector's grabbed it. No flies on him, I see. . . ."

Father and son exchanged glances and looked at Pimen, who sat raking the ashes in the fire with a charred stick.

"How about having a shot under the lock, Pimen?" Avdei said, stroking his beard. "The other day Yegor spotted shoals of bream down by the woods. My cast-net is closely woven and my boat's a light, quick goer. I've caulked and tarred her. It'll be a pleasure to spend a night fishing."

"All right," Pimen growled. "We'll have a go when the ice passes."

They chatted for a while, then parted.

Meanwhile the hubbub on the right bank near the stanitsa never ceased for a moment.

The fishermen did not take their eyes off the dark swollen ice-field, which crept downstream, and did not leave the bank for a minute. Even those who lived quite near did not go home for lunch or dinner. The women brought them their meals in osier baskets. They sat around on tarpaulins spread on the damp ground, eating tough sun-dried fishes, flat cakes, and curds, and drinking

wine out of bottles corked with corn-cobs. They kept glancing at the river and spoke in excited tones.

Marfa, obtaining leave from Grandpa Shrimp, ran home, too, and brought Vasili a slice of bacon wrapped up in a clean piece of linen, a loaf, and an army flask filled with wine.

Striding along in her padded trousers and heavy top boots, she went over to the motor boat, at which Vasili was tinkering, and said with a smile: "Have something to eat, Vasya, otherwise you'll starve to death."

Vasili laid his file on the gunwale, wiped his hands, and went up to her.

She was standing against the sun, her woolly shawl thrown back over her head. The wind fluttered her fair hair and played with the ends of her loose shawl.

"All right," Vasili said, "let's sit down together, Marfa Panteleyevna, and drink to a lucky season."

"Let's," smiled Marfa.

They sat down on the end of the log on which the motor boat stood. Marfa turned the round little basket bottomside up, spread the piece of linen on it, and set out the pork and bread. She unscrewed the drinking-cap of the flask, filled it with wine, and held it out to Vasili.

"It isn't done," he said, touching her hand. "Ladies first, you know."

"All right, then. Have it your way."

Marfa lifted the cup, drove the smile from her face, and said gravely: "So you want to drink to a lucky fishing-season, Vasya? Is that all? Very well then, here's to the fishing."

She tossed the wine off masculine-fashion and handed Vasili the flask.

"Your turn now."

Just as Vasili was pouring out the wine and telling his landlady that he was going to drink to her health, Grunya walked slowly past with her head averted.

"Hullo, Grunya!" Vasili hailed her.

The girl glanced at him, frowning, nodded, and quickening her pace, all but fled towards the fishing-boats.

"Hallo-o-oo!" came a shout from Church Market Hills. "The ice is moving faster!"

"That means the water will be clear overnight!"

"We'll be able to shoot the seine by morning!"

The immense ice-field, creeping past the stanitsa and leaving outskirts of gurgling water, was moving towards the river bend. Suddenly there was a crash. The rooks darted up into the sky. The pochards cleared the long crevice and whizzed past, disappearing behind the woods. The ice-field had split in two and water gushed from the crack, which ran right across the river from bank to bank. Both halves of the sundered ice-field began to heave on the water. Part of the ice-field, creeping along behind, broke off and tumbled over the one in front. The crash and roar of the debacle grew steadily louder and more terrifying. Here and there in the drifting ice-floes appeared patches of open water.

Antropov glanced at the boat with the folded seine standing nearest to the water, and went over to the kol-khoz chairman.

"Well, Kuzma Fedorovich," he said, pointing to the river, "isn't it time to begin?"

The manager of the curing-shop, who was sitting next to Mosolov, looked up startled.

"You're not ill by any chance, are you? How can you launch a boat in this chaos? It's suicide!"

"Hadn't we better wait a bit?" the chairman said doubtfully, and for some reason pulled out his watch.

Grandpa Shrimp, Zubov, Prokhorov, Marfa, and Grunya came up, followed one after another by all the fishermen with their wives and children, who were crowded on the bank.

Antropov scanned the river again and said to Mosolov: "I think we can try."

Heavy blocks of ice collided with a roar on the turbulent river. The patches of open water grew wider only to be instantly blocked up by ice-packs pushing on from behind. It was doubtful whether any boat could come safely through that roaring maelstrom.

"Let's wait a bit," the chairman urged. "This is courting sure death. Let's wait till to-morrow—it will be safer."

Antropov, however, was not to be dissuaded. Stamping down the sludge underfoot with his heavy boots, he stood before Mosolov and repeated doggedly: "It's time to begin. A fisherman should be a man, not a chicken. It'll do the young folks good to get used to the idea that no one's going to serve the fish up to them on a platter. What sort of fishermen are we if we're going to let the river scare us? The fish haven't been disturbed yet, and we can make a big haul."

"We don't want to force anybody," Grandpa Shrimp said weightily, chewing his lips, "but if anybody wants to volunteer, I don't see why we should object. Nothing venture nothing have, you know."

This speech convinced the chairman. He looked at the roaring ice-drift with a shudder and made a half-hearted gesture of consent.

"Do as you like, Arkhip Ivanovich," he said. "But on your own responsibility, and no compulsion, mind—pick your crew of volunteers."

Upon hearing the chairman's decision, the fishermen began to edge away, casting nervous glances at Antropov.

The team-leader sauntered up to the boat, stroked the seine, pulled out his tobacco-pouch, and addressed the fishermen gathered round him: "Well, boys? Anyone care to pull an oar?"

Two strapping lads threw off their tarpaulins and stepped up to him.

"We'll go, Uncle Arkhip!"

Four more fishermen agreed to man the boat, but the wife of one of them, a comely young woman in a grey jacket, rushed up, seized her husband's arm, and shouted: "Have you gone crazy? Don't you see what the river is like? Are you tired of living, or what?"

The fishermen guffawed. The disconcerted volunteer tried to wrench his arm free, but his wife hung on like grim death, and dragged him away, her face burning with anger.

"Shove off!" Antropov commanded. "We'll manage without him."

The heavy boat grated over the sand, nosed into the water, stood still for a second, then rocked on the waves. The oarsmen began to pull away from the shore. Antropov stood in the middle of the boat with his legs braced, holding on to the folded seine.

The rowers swung back the oars. Tacking among the drifting ice-floes, the boat shot out towards midstream.

The fishermen thronged the bank, their eyes glued to the boat. Antropov had begun to pay out the seine. A dozen or so of the more experienced and fearless fishermen got into their wherries, put off from the shore, and began pushing the ice away with their boat-hooks to clear a return passage for the seine-boat. Most of the women of Shrimp's team lined the bank, ready to haul in the seine.

Vasili, standing on the bank with the rest of the crowd, watched the seine-boat reach midstream with a fast-beating heart. He had a good view of Antropov, who, judging by the movements of his hands and head, was shouting something to the oarsmen. His words, however, were drowned in the crash and roar of the ice.

Suddenly a block of ice—to Vasili, standing on the bank, it looked small—slid off the ice-floe and struck the seine-boat on the starboard side. The boat listed sharply, shipped a wave, and settled heavily in the water. The crew began bailing swiftly, and the wind dashed the water into a fine spray which glittered in the sun with all the colours of a rainbow.

"Hell!" the chairman groaned. "I told him not to risk it."

"You should have stopped them, Kuzma Fedorovich," Prokhorov said plaintively. "How can you send men out on such a dangerous job?"

A second ice-floe struck the boat head on. She swivelled round, but obeying the oars, righted herself and steered clear of the ice. The fishermen in their wherries did their best to free a passage for her with the boat-hooks, but the ice-floes beset her more and more.

The seine-boat was already making for the shore when two ice-floes converged on the stern. There was a loud splintering noise. The people ashore gasped. Antropov shouted to the oarsmen, who threw themselves back and pulled with all their might to tear the boat out of the icy vortex. A minute later the heavy boat, filled with water and chips of ice, grounded on the beach. The men and women on the bank rushed towards it.

Vasili ran down to the boat, too. He saw the fisherwomen receive the end lines of the seine and make them fast with the help of the fishermen from the wherries. Meanwhile Antropov, who had changed over to a light boat with two new oarsmen, lay in the bow with bared arms in the water, feeling the head lines and the dancing wooden floats, and adjusting the net.

Most of the fishermen and the children had rushed to the spot where Antropov's and Shrimp's teams were busy with the seine lines. Prokhorov had run there too. Several fishermen, clad in watertight overalls, were stand-

ing waist-deep in the water, hauling in the heavy purse. Fishes large and small struggled in the meshes—the first spring catch. People crowded round the net. Dozens of hands seized the fishes and sorted them out in round baskets. Boys and girls, amid jokes and laughter, carried the baskets to a line of carts and stowed them there.

The bank hummed like a beehive.

“A good haul!” the old fishermen said, nodding their heads.

“Naturally. The fish isn’t scared yet.”

“Arkhip knows his business all right! He always likes to shoot the first net.”

“Plucky fisher. You won’t find another like him on the whole river!”

Meanwhile, a little apart, Antropov cornered Mosolov against the side of a beached barge, and was lecturing the chairman in low tones.

“You may be an ex-tankman, Kuzma Fedorovich, but you’re a duffer. Yes, yes, don’t be offended. A fisherman’s job requires grit. You’ve got to take risks. When the ice has broken up and started moving it’s no time for cackling and throwing a wet blanket on people. If you’re going to stroll about the bank in galoshes, waiting for the weather, you’ll miss the best catch.”

He tilted his cap back and shouted to the fishermen: “Are they all landed? Get the seine ready for a second shot! There’s no time to lose!”

3

Within a week there was not a chip of ice on the river. Fishing was going on day and night. All three teams were constantly on the river. The fishermen knocked together wooden shanties and slept at the grounds so as not to lose time on going back and forth.

It seemed as if the whole stanitsa had moved out to the river. Only the very old and the very young remained at home. Everyone who could be of use—men, women, and youngsters—lived on the river after the ice had passed. Camp-fires burned day and night on the left bank where the main Golubovskaya fishing-grounds were situated. The fishing-nets were barely dry when they were stowed back in the boats and cast again.

Mosolov hurried the fishermen on. The spring close-season, when fishing would be prohibited for a long time, was drawing near, and the chairman was anxious to fulfil at least a third of the fishing plan before then.

Telegrams came from the district and regional centres inquiring about the fishing. With the help of the book-keeper, Mosolov drafted hasty replies, then ran back again to the fishing-grounds where he checked every net and recorded the landings of each team in his greasy note-book. So far all three teams were running level and it was difficult to say which would take the lead.

The Golubovskaya fishing kolkhoz was competing with a neighbouring kolkhoz at Sudachi hamlet, four miles below the bend of the river. At a joint conference of the two kolkhoz boards an ingenious plan of mutual information had been worked out. The fishermen erected two tall masts on the highest hill-tops, one at each of the competing kolkhozes. If the fishing teams fulfilled their daily catch plan by the evening, a red flag was hoisted on the mast, telling their neighbours: "We have done it." If the plan was overfulfilled, two flags were run up, and if the daily quota was not fulfilled, no flag was raised.

Red flags had been flying from both masts every evening since the fishing-season started, and no one could as yet predict which of the two fisheries would win the challenge banner.

The heavily loaded fishing-barges scudded from morning till night from the left bank to the stanitsa jetty, where a crowd of merrily chattering girls from the transport team stowed the fish into baskets which were then carted to the curing-shop.

"You won't have an inch of room left in your yard soon," Zubov said to Golovnev, as he watched the unloading and the salting of the fish in the curing-shop.

Golovnev wiped his hot face with his sleeve.

"I'm expecting the cannery's launches any day, Vasili Kirillovich," he explained. "They're the last word in modern equipment—cold storage, portable cranes, fish pumps, and all kinds of mechanical presses. I'll be able to breathe easier when the launches arrive. They take most of the fish into the holds straight off the barges and deliver it to the cannery."

After examining the fish in the shop, Vasili ran down to his motor boat, at which Yasha, the new motor-man, was busy tinkering. Yasha, a war invalid, was a lean young man with a black band over his left eye which had been knocked out by a mine splinter.

"Well, how goes it?" Vasili asked, admiring the young man's dexterous hands.

"All in order," the motor-man reported. "I've given her an oiling and checked the engine. She'll go like the wind."

"Good. We'll be needing her soon."

In the evening Vasili decided to have a talk with his assistant. Grunya was not at home. The under-inspector was sitting by the window with his tools spread out on the sill, sharpening some big sheat-fish hooks.

Vasili took his cap off and sat down on a stool. His wandering glance came to rest on a carbine standing in the corner. He picked it up, clicked open the lock, and peered down the barrel.

"Your gun needs cleaning, Ivan Nikanorovich," he said with a frown. "It's all rusty and choked with dirt. The sergeant major in our regiment would have given you a jawing for a gun like that."

"I'll clean it," Prokhorov said. "I don't really need it, you know."

"I suppose you lived in peace with the poachers?" Vasili smiled, replacing the carbine.

The under-inspector bent lower over the window-sill and kept his face averted.

"I didn't have much say," he mumbled with a guilty air. "I just did what I was told. We let people alone and no one had anything against us."

Vasili got up and took a turn about the room, glancing surreptitiously at the narrow bed in the corner under a white coverlet. Then, with his eyes on Prokhorov's back, he went on speaking.

"Some people didn't have a bad time, of course, especially the inspector's good friends and relatives; but the state suffered because the poachers robbed it, and robbed it with impunity, mind you. Tons of fish were wantonly destroyed. Isn't that so?"

"I daresay you're right, but——"

"Wait a minute. Do you know that the haul in our area is only a fraction of what it was? You do? Don't you realize that you and I are responsible for this above all others?"

He got out of his map-case a booklet containing the regulations on fish preservation, turned over the pages, and handed it to Prokhorov.

"Read this booklet, and bear in mind that Soviet laws are made to be kept."

"Why, of course!" Prokhorov said in confusion. "I'm not against the laws, am I?"

Zubov sat down on the stool. Choosing his words carefully, he continued:

"Look here, Ivan Nikanorovich. I don't like having to say this, but I must. Certain comrades, and highly respected ones, insist on your dismissal. They say you're unfit for the job. Yes. I went bail for you, promised that you would work well. So don't let me down. I'm a new man here, you see, and am liable to make mistakes. Who'll help me if you won't?"

Prokhorov fumbled the booklet with a bewildered air and looked up at Zubov.

"Folks are right," he muttered, puckering his brows. "I'm a quiet sort of chap—much too mild.... Not that I'm afraid. I don't know, but somehow I can't get myself to tell people that they mustn't do this or that.... You know, you tell a fellow once or twice, then he starts coaxing and wheedling, and you allow him to bag-net a little dace, and behind your back he goes and shoots a cast-net...."

"There, you see," Vasili interrupted him. "Angling and fishing with a hoop-net is permitted, there's no objection to that, but we can't stand by while the river is being exhausted."

Prokhorov nodded. "That's true, Vasili Kirillovich, quite true." His lips quivered. "But please don't dismiss me—because—I mean, what will I do? My health is no good and I'm getting on in years...."

He left the sentence unfinished, for Grunya came into the room.

She must have overheard her father's words, for she stopped in the doorway, threw her white scarf back over her shoulders, and said reproachfully:

"Why do you keep whining all the time, Dad?"

Frowning, she nodded to Vasili, who had risen to greet her, then went over to her father and touched his sleeve, saying in a tone of hidden tenderness: "It's high time you quitted the inspection. You're not making a go of it. No really"—she turned to Vasili—"You ought

to let him go. This job on the river is too much for Father."

"Ivan Nikanorovich has just been asking me not to," Vasili said.

The girl shrugged her shoulders with annoyance. "The more's the pity."

Vasili, watching the girl, wondered: "Is she sincere or just pretending?"

"Why?" he said. "He's been on this job for a long time and has got used to it."

"That's just it—he's got used to it. People have got used to him too. He's one of us, they say, and so they think they can fish as much as they like."

Prokhorov's eyebrows went up in surprise. "Who says that?"

"Oh, everybody."

Grunya crossed the room, toying with the ends of her scarf, and began to rearrange the books on a corner table.

"However, the matter's settled between your father and myself. He's staying on," Vasili said.

He was reluctant to leave, but picking up his cap, he said good-bye to Prokhorov, and went up to Grunya.

"Good night."

The girl's eye-lashes twitched.

"Good night."

Her eyes, for all that she tried to hide them, told Vasili that she wanted him to stay. But as he had already taken his leave, and she had not said anything, it would be rather awkward to stay, and Vasili went quickly out.

While Zubov had been talking with Prokhorov, a few villagers had gathered in the little house of Avdei Talalayev, the old ferryman. The guests were Yegor's crony Trifon Sazonov, the salesman at the co-operative store, and Tit Chakushin, the deaf-mute lock carpenter, a brawny good-natured giant of forty.

When they were well in their cups the talk switched over to a subject of general interest—fish. The dapper little ferryman, his pink face and smooth bald pate aglow with conviviality, glanced from his jovial son to Trifon Sazonov, the salesman, chuckling and shaking his head. The deaf-mute Tit sat at the bottom of the table tossing off glass after glass with an air of grim concentration.

“Heigh-ho!” old Avdei said with a sigh, nudging his son with his elbow. “Looking at you, Yegor, reminds me what a wishy-washy bunch the young folks are these days. No go in them at all. I remember, every spring soon as the ice went past we used to spend day and night on the river. And the amount of fish we used to lug home! Afterwards, of course, we sold them and bought ourselves smart leather high-boots with a squeak in them, made ourselves frock-coats out of the best cloth, and loaded the girls up with chocolate and honey-cakes. That was the life.”

He raised his glass with a trembling hand, tossed it off, wiped his moustache with a corner of the table-cloth, and glanced reproachfully at Yegor, who sat sprawling on a bench.

“Those were different times,” Yegor said lazily. “Fish these days is sacred socialist property, and you daren’t touch it. You can use a rod or a fishing-line, but as for a cast-net, or a seine, or a boulder—you might as well forget it, Dad. Those days are gone.”

Red-haired Trifon murmured thoughtfully: “Wouldn’t be a bad idea to make a haul under the lock—couple of hundredweights or so. I could do with a little extra cash to buy an accordion. I’ve had my eye on one for some time. With a bit of luck one night’s fishing would just about do the trick.”

“Couple of hundredweights, pshaw!” growled Yegor. “If you’re going to dirty your hands, at least make it worth your while.”

He slipped his arm round his friend's waist, drew him away from the table, and got him into a corner where the sheepskin coats were hanging.

"I'm stone-broke and in a hell of a fix," he said, breathing alcoholic fumes into his pal's face. "I've got a crush on a gal, Trifon. I'm keeping it to myself, haven't told anybody a word, but I'm just pining for her, damn her. Life's become a misery."

"What gal's that?" Trifon asked, his curiosity piqued.

"Grunya Prokhorova, the under-inspector's daughter," Yegor said moodily. "Know her?"

"Don't I!" Trifon grinned. "I've seen her knocking around the lakes many a time."

"I tried to have it out with her once or twice, but she won't listen," Yegor continued. "Mind you, she lives like a church mouse—her father's a good-for-nothing, and the house they live in isn't their own—more like a kennel than a house. I've got a mind to break her pride. If only I had the money, I'd make her sing a different tune."

"Hold on there, Yegor," his friend tried to argue with him. "Grunya is a Komsomol girl, she won't rise to that bait."

"A fat lot you know," snapped Yegor. "But I'll tell you one thing, Trifon—that girl will be mine all the same. I'll get her by hook or by crook."

He fell silent, looked round the company sitting at the table, then gripped the lapels of Trifon's stylish jacket and muttered: "Get ready for to-morrow, Trifon. We'll shoot a net under the lock. The carp's running fine, so's the bream."

"What about the inspector?"

"To hell with the inspector! He'd better keep out of the way!"

The result of their whispered conversation was an arrangement to go out on Saturday night and do some fishing at the dismantled lock. Trifon was to conceal a

cast-net and a landing-net in the woods, while Yegor was to run his father's boat down to the lock-post and hide a pair of oars in the bushes.

"Have a talk with Tit—you know the sign language," Trifon said, "and tell him to run down to the woods on Saturday night and bring some good strong sacks with him. We won't be able to lug the stuff away without his help. He's as strong as a devil."

"Right-ho, I'll have a talk with him."

The company broke up early that evening, and Trifon decided to go down to the co-op store for a minute.

He ran across Zubov at the counter. The latter was selecting shells for his shot-gun. While the sales-girl was wrapping up his purchase, Trifon decided to have a chat with Zubov in the hope of sounding out where the inspector intended to spend Saturday evening.

"Well, Comrade Inspector, have you made yourself at home here?" Trifon said with an affable smile, getting behind the counter.

"Yes, settling down little by little," Vasili answered.

"You're a bachelor, I believe," the salesman went on, tossing back his mop of hair. "How's it we don't see you among the young set?"

"Why, I go to the club—where else can one go?" Vasili smiled.

"The club's not bad in its way, but you can't get much fun out of that. We've got a couple of nice young school-teachers here—you can go in for a bit of courting if you feel like it. It must be awful lonesome to live the way you do—I'd be bored to death. Saturday's my day for spending an evening with the girls."

Trifon screwed his eyes up cunningly and looked at Vasili. "I suppose you sit at home on Saturdays?"

The man's inquisitiveness began to annoy Vasili, and he answered drily: "It all depends. I don't live by schedule."

Vasili took his purchase and went out.

It was sunset, but the balmy breath of a spring day still lingered in the air. Women stood at the wickets; they followed Vasili with curious glances. Flocks of rooks flew about over the islet in the Barsovka. From everywhere came the scents of spring—from the moist earth, from the budding trees, and from the river, flowing unseen behind the orchards.

4

A cannery launch arrived at the stanitsa the next day. It came alongside the jetty and started to take on the fresh fish.

Zubov, his cap tilted to the back of his head and his short leather coat thrown over his shoulders, went up to the launch, greeted Mosolov and Golovnev, who were sitting on the deck, nodded to the skipper, and glanced at the fish which was being unloaded from the barges that had just come from Talovaya. There were four barges full of squirming fish—breams, roaches, and carps. Vasili went up closer, and it struck him that there was too great a proportion of under-sized fishes in the general mass. He watched loading operations for several more minutes, then spun round and went over to the skipper, who was chatting with the fishery chairman and the manager of the curing-shop.

Vasili touched his cap politely and said to the skipper: "Stop the loading, please."

"Why?" asked the skipper, an elderly man in a black pea-jacket. "Who are you?"

"I'm the district inspector of fisheries, and I want to make a test for fry limits."

Mosolov and Golovnev looked at Vasili in surprise, while the skipper coughed and said weightily: "Pardon

me, Comrade Inspector, but I'm a new man in the fishing-fleet. I can't hold up loading operations, and I haven't the faintest idea what 'fry limits' means."

"It's the margin of under-sized fishes allowed in a catch, Comrade Captain, that is to say, immature and young fishes under the size limit provided for in the regulations," Vasili coolly explained. "The law allows no more than eight per cent of smalls in each catch."

"But what if your smalls defy the regulations?" the skipper chuckled. "What's to be done then? Tell them to keep within the limits?"

Vasili glanced at Golovnev and Mosolov, who remained silent, and said firmly: "As soon as the net is hauled in, the fishermen are obliged to turn the young fish back into the river, alive and unhurt. This rule must be observed by every fisherman, and not just the fishery inspector. Please hold up the loading until I make a test."

The skipper shrugged his shoulders, then blew his whistle and gave the order to the engine-room. The loading machinery came to a stop. The sailors, with tarpaulin hoods over their heads, sat down and threw puzzled glances at the skipper.

While Vasili, with the help of a sailor, was counting the number of fishes in three test samples drawn from different barges, Mosolov said to Golovnev in a vexed tone:

"Well, Mikhail Stepanovich, looks like this boy is beginning to show his claws. If he's going to carry on like this, our kolkhoz doesn't stand an earthly chance of keeping the lead. He'd do better chasing poachers instead of meddling with our work. Anyone would think the kolkhoz puts the fish into its own pocket instead of delivering it to the state."

Golovnev smiled imperturbably. As an agent of the fish cannery, it was no business of his to interfere in what Zubov was doing. "He has his own relations with

the fishermen," thought Golovnev. "Let them clear the mess up between them; it's nothing to do with me."

After checking the fish Vasili went up to Mosolov and asked: "Which team made this catch, Kuzma Fedorovich?"

"The second team, I believe," Mosolov said gloomily. "It's their boats."

"In that case, please send to the fishing-grounds for the team-leader, Talalayev."

"What for?" the chairman said, frowning.

"There's eleven per cent of fish young in Talalayev's catch," Vasili said, consulting his note-book. "I'll have to confiscate the whole batch and hand it over to the cannery as state revenue. It will be excluded from your fishery plan, of course, and the fishermen of the second team will not get paid for it."

"D'you hear that?" Mosolov said, turning to the shop manager. "We'll lag at the tail-end if this goes on——"

Golovnev scratched his chin in silence and stared at the clean-scrubbed deck.

"Will you please send for the team-leader, Kuzma Fedorovich," Vasili repeated.

Mosolov leaned over the ship's side and shouted to a fisher-boy in one of the barges: "Take a boat and row over to Talovaya; tell Pimen he's wanted here at once!"

He took a walk along the rails, then looked at Zubov, and proffered him his leather cigarette-case.

"You're right, of course, Comrade Zubov," he said, trying to soften his hoarse voice. "The law's on your side. But it seems to me every man should have some feeling of local patriotism. And that, Comrade Zubov, is just what you lack."

"What has patriotism got to do with it?" Vasili flared up.

"Everything, Comrade Zubov. There isn't a fisher who isn't keen on fulfilling his obligations to the Soviet

state and reporting his work successes with a clean conscience. I mean to say, this is not a private racket, it's an artel, a fishing kolkhoz, and our produce goes to the state, not just to anybody. So why should we be bureaucrats and put spokes in the fishermen's wheels?"

Mosolov went up to Vasili, put his hand on his shoulder, and said coaxingly: "Let's overlook this first offence, Comrade Inspector, eh?"

"First?" Vasili exploded. "No, Comrade Chairman, as far as I can see this is not the first time such things have been going on here. You talk about bureaucrats, but you don't seem to realize that in doing so you're defending downright robbers. No, I'm not going to make any deals with my conscience. The fish will be confiscated and the team-leader must be punished. That's my decision."

A boat came alongside the launch, and Pimen Talalayev climbed on deck. His tarpaulin, his boots, and his hood, thrown back from his head, glistened with fish-scales, and his face was wet with perspiration. The team-leader, eyeing the group of men with a scowl, stepped up to Mosolov, his boots leaving pools of water on the light linoleum.

"Want to see me, Chairman?" he growled.

"The inspector wants to see you," Mosolov said with a vague gesture.

Vasili drew his note-book out of his leather case, sat down on the edge of a bench, and said, without glancing at the team-leader: "You'll have to sign an official statement, Comrade Talalayev."

"What statement?" the team-leader said, uncomprehending.

"A statement putting on record the illegal landing of fish fry. Your catch contains eleven per cent of undersized fishes, which it was your duty to put back in the river at once. Your failure to do so has ruined about ten thousand young fishes of future marketable value. I am

therefore confiscating the whole catch and writing up a report to that effect. Is that clear?"

Talalayev went red in the face. He unbuttoned his tarpaulin and stared at Mosolov, then at Golovnev.

"What's the idea?" he boomed in a flustered tone. "We've been fishing for years, and no one's ever written up any statement against us. What will I tell my fishermen? They've been working like devils these last two days and nights, overfulfilled their stint, and delivered the fish to the state, and now, instead of gratitude, they get a whack over the head! A fine business, I must say!"

He kept raising his voice; he had quite a large audience: Mosolov and Golovnev, the crew of the launch, the girl salters, and the fishermen in their boats moored alongside the launch. Vasili realized that this was the beginning of the long and arduous duel which would last until he had succeeded in enforcing strict observance of fishing rules in his area.

Vasili went up to a sailor sitting on the companion-way and said curtly: "Fetch the basket with the tests."

The man ran down below deck and came up, panting, with a big basket containing insensible fishes of the smallest sizes.

Vasili prodded the basket with his foot and said quietly: "What is this?"

"Fish, of course," Talalayev said, stepping back.

"But what fish? Who are you trying to fool? Is this the first time you've caught fish? Can't you tell the difference between fry and full-grown fish?"

"Who says it's the first time?" Talalayev said in a hurt tone. "I've been leader of the fishing team these twelve years, and I can teach a thing or two to some educated people."

Suppressing his anger with difficulty, Vasili demanded: "You know the rules about landing young fish, don't you?"

"I do," the team-leader growled.

"You know that your team has broken the rules and caught eleven per cent of under-sized fish?"

Talalayev hid a sneer in his stiff, drooping moustache.

"You don't expect me to measure every little fish with a tape and put its size down in a note-book? My job's to fulfil the state catch plan, and if anyone wants to measure fish-tails with a yard-stick, let him go ahead, if he hasn't got anything better to do."

Zubov paled. He went slowly up to Talalayev and said in clipped tones: "D'you mean that seriously or are you just playing the fool? In either case you're defending criminal actions against the state, and it's my duty to put a stop to them. Please sign this statement concerning the confiscation of your catch. Two fishermen of your team witnessed the test and have already signed their names."

He handed the sheet of paper to Talalayev. The latter, with a glance at the chairman, signed his name in a bottom corner.

"That's not all," Zubov said. "I warn you in the presence of the kolkhoz chairman that the next time I find more than eight per cent of smalls in your catch I'll prohibit fishing at Talovaya altogether and report it to the authorities. Is that clear?"

"Yes," Talalayev growled.

"You can go."

Turning to Golovnev, Vasili said: "Mikhail Stepanovich, exclude this haul from the kolkhoz plan and deliver it to the cannery at a reduced rate. Enter it as state revenue."

After the team-leader had gone, Mosolov irritably struck a match, lighted a cigarette, and said to Vasili: "You're not right, though, Comrade Zubov. You should have let him off with a warning this first time. After all, he wasn't doing it for himself, but for the kolkhoz."

Besides, you can't just observe the dead letter of the law at the kolkhoz's expense."

"Look here, Kuzma Fedorovich," Vasili said with a frown. "The kolkhoz should work honestly and its management shouldn't try to throw dust into the eyes of the authorities by palming off small fish in fulfilment of its plan."

Mosolov looked at him with a surly eye and nudged the manager of the curing-shop, who had not uttered a word throughout.

"How d'you like that?"

Golovnev smiled but did not answer at once. Picking up a small fish by the tail, he shook his head and said: "A bit on the small side, eh? If it were kept in the water for a year or two, I daresay, it would grow into a full-sized market product."

Golovnev turned over Takalayev's catch to the skipper of the cannery launch, struck the whole amount off the daily report, and went home.

Inside of an hour the fishermen at Sudachi hamlet were astonished to see that the red flag, which had been flying on the Golubovskaya mast since morning, had disappeared.

"What the devil's the matter out there?" the hamlet fishermen asked one another blankly. "The flag's been up since morning, which means they fulfilled the daily plan, and now it's gone!"

"Maybe a barge sank with the catch in it?" someone hazarded a guess.

"We ought to send someone over on horseback to find out what the trouble is."

The mounted messenger of the Sudachi fishery came back with the astounding report that the new fishery inspection officer had confiscated the whole catch of the second team and drawn up a statement on the violation by the team-leader of the fry limits.

"Pretty thorough-going fellow!" the fishermen said, shaking their heads. "It never happened under the old inspector, they lived in peace with him...."

Vasili stepped ashore and sat down on a log near his motor boat, which was already afloat.

It was a warm sunny day. The river was dazzling. Yasha, the motor-man, lay sunning himself on the deck, his single eye screwed up against the glare. Vasili sat silent, smoking. Scanning the left and right banks, he could see the village anglers fishing. Below Church Market, Timofei Timofeyevich, the old pensioned-off schoolmaster, stood on a boulder with a fishing-rod. A little farther downstream three boys sat angling in a flat-bottomed boat. On the left bank some old men from the collective farm were fishing with rod and line, while dapper little Avdei sat on his ferry-boat with a fishing-line.

Fishing with rod and line was permitted on the river, and none of the anglers took any notice of the inspector sitting by his boat. Only two women, who were rinsing their washing in the river, glanced at Vasili and went on with their occupation.

Towards noon Yegor Talalayev and red-haired Trifon, the co-op salesman, came down to the river. They sauntered along the bank, glancing occasionally at Zubov and cracking sunflower seeds, their whole demeanour saying plainly that they did not care a hang for the fish, the river, or the inspector.

Laughing and joking, they sat down on the ferry-boat with their backs to Vasili. Avdei pottered about near them with his fishing-lines while they exchanged short phrases in undertones.

"Doesn't leave his motor boat for a minute."

"He's an old bird, I bet."

"This morning he confiscated my uncle's whole catch."

Trifon glanced nervously at Yegor and said: "Hadn't we better call it off to-day?"

"No fear," Yegor cut him short. "He that's afraid of wolves should keep out of the woods."

5

At nightfall Yegor took himself off to the forest. He went by way of the back-yards to avoid being seen. Removing his boots and socks, he waded across the shallow Barsovka, stood for a while on the edge of the wooded island, then plunged into the thickets, whistling softly. His signal being unanswered, he paused and whistled again. There was no response.

"What's the matter with the blighter, has he got cold feet?" he muttered.

He decided to wait half an hour. All was still. Only the dark leafless trees rustled their branches. Yegor could feel the soft cool blades of the sprouting grass under his bare feet. A wood-owl, looking like a grey rag, flew past him, grazing the branches of the young poplars. Stars twinkled in the sky, and a new moon hung over the river.

Yegor took a deep breath, spat out through his teeth, and was about to go home when he suddenly heard Trifon's low whistle.

"Well, where've you been all this time?" he demanded in a low voice. "It's just the time to shoot the net, and we're taking a stroll here."

"I had a hell of a job getting away," Trifon gasped. "Some men came down from co-op headquarters, wanting all kinds of information—pestered the life out of me. I thought I'd never get rid of them."

"All right, come along!" Yegor interrupted him.

Trifon, to be on the safe side, asked his pal again: "Hadn't we better put it off?"

"Not on your life!" snapped Yegor. "I mean business. Come on!"

They passed through the woods, found the cast-net and the oars which Trifon had covered up with dry leaves in the thickets, and keeping to the edge of the wood, reached the boat which was moored to a stake.

Yegor strained his ears. Not a sound broke the stillness of the night. Two camp-fires were burning on the left bank, apparently at Talovaya. The water lapped the sides of the rocking boat with a low murmur.

"Take the oars and pull straight for Zamanukha!" Yegor ordered.

He unlocked the padlock, noiselessly stowed away the anchor-chain, seated himself in the stern with a scull, and flung out: "Shove off!"

Zamanukha, meaning Lure, was the local name for a secluded stretch of river between the island and the long masonry dam which ran parallel to the banks and divided the river in two. This auxiliary dam, running perpendicular to the main dam, slackened the pressure of the water and protected the submerged lock structures from being washed away. The name was an apt one: herrings, breams, carps, roaches, and sundry small fry ascending the river were "lured" here by the thousand. The place, of course, was strictly out of bounds, but inasmuch as the girders had not yet been raised and no guards were on duty on the dam, Yegor's only fear was that he might meet the inspector, in which case he would "knock the stuffing out of him," as he boastfully declared.

The boat slipped out of the backwater and sped along the dam towards Zamanukha.

Yegor, his trouser-legs rolled up, stood aft with the net ready in his hands.

A purse-net demands great skill of a fisherman. Stowed away in the boat, it looks like a worthless rag, but

in the hands of an experienced fisherman it is an effective means of capture. Shot into the water from a swiftly moving boat, the net opens out like a parachute and is tugged by the sinkers to the bottom where it covers the fish over a large area. It is then drawn together by a strong rope and hauled aboard like a gigantic purse filled with fish.

"Don't be afraid, Trifon! Get right out into the whirlpool!" Yegor snapped out.

As the boat cleaved the white foam of the under-lock rapids, Yegor, bracing his body with bare legs planted wide apart, flung the net out with a vigorous sweep. A minute later he tautened the line and hauled in the heavy net, shouting to Trifon with a grin: "Whew! Not less than a hundredweight!"

Grunting with the effort, he dragged the net over the side and emptied the squirming fishes into the boat.

"Keep it up, Trifon! Didn't I tell you we'd land five hundredweights by the morning!"

Trifon bent to the oars again, and the light boat shot upstream. With a swish Yegor sent in the net again. They covered the length and breadth of Zamanukha. The boat, now half-full of fish, sat deep in the water, and Trifon was having a hard time of it at the oars, but Yegor still kept at it. Nothing around augured any danger, and so the friends decided to fill their boat to the brim.

Meanwhile, Vasili Zubov left the cottage and made his way down to the bank where the motor-man was waiting for him. Half-way, Vasili suddenly changed his mind and went to the little house of the under-inspector. The Prokhorovs were still up, apparently, for Vasili could see the light of a lamp streaming through the half-closed shutters.

He tapped on the window-frame.

"Who is it?" came Grunya's displeased voice.

"It's me, Zubov. Is your father in?"

"Just a minute," the girl answered hastily. Her voice sounded glad. "I'll slip something on."

"Never mind, Grunya," he muttered in confusion. "Don't bother. If your father's at home, tell him to come out—I want to see him urgently."

A minute later the under-inspector drew the latch and appeared, coughing, upon the threshold. He looked at Zubov in alarm. "What is it, Vasili Kirillovich? Anything the matter?"

"No, nothing, Ivan Nikanorovich. Please take your oars and let's go down to your boat. We'll take a little run on the river," Zubov said. "I intended going in the motor boat, but I've changed my mind. It's too noisy. The row-boat's more convenient. That's why I've troubled you."

They took the oars, went down to the river in silence, got into the boat, and pushed off.

"Where shall I steer, Vasili Kirillovich?" Prokhorov asked.

"Let's have a look at the left bank, then take a spin round Zamanukha," Vasili said, shivering slightly from the chill night air. He was sorry he had not taken his coat. It was much colder on the river than it was in the stanitsa.

The boat crossed the river. Prokhorov, leaning on his left oar, described a semicircle near the dam. There was not a soul in sight.

"Let me take the oars," Zubov said. "I feel a bit chilly."

They changed places. The boat, yielding itself to the current, glided noiselessly along the dam, and Vasili, gently dipping the oars, gazed at the rippling reflection of the stars in the water, the trees of Poplar Wood looming darkly on the bank, and the lights of the camp-fires at Talovaya. The boat, grazing the stone projection of the dam, turned into Zamanukha.

Prokhorov sat bolt upright, peered into the darkness from under his cupped hand, and said in a tone of alarm: "Someone's fishing out there! I can see a boat."

Vasili looked round. The dim outline of a boat could be seen against the lighter background of the foaming rapids. It kept moving up and down the stream and going round in small circles: someone was fishing with a purse-net!

"Let me take the oars," Prokhorov suggested.

"Right," Vasili said tensely. "Row upstream and keep in the shadow of the dam. We'll slip up quietly."

"They can't get out of Zamanukha anyhow," the under-inspector muttered. "We've cut them off. Unless they leave the boat with the fish and get away through the woods...."

The boat slid into the black shadow of the tall dam and began to move upstream.

It was past one o'clock. Trifon's arms were numb with fatigue. The boat was full of fish and stood in the water almost up to the gunwale, but the insatiable Yegor kept casting the net again and again, hawling up heavy breams, carps, pike-perches. Trifon sat at the oars with raised knees, for his feet pressed against the cold mass of fish; his numb hands slithered on the oar-handles which were covered with fish-scales.

"One more shot and we'll go home," Yegor reassured his pal. "You can see yourself, every shot makes you a hundred rubles to the good."

Suddenly, through the splash of water, Trifon caught the sound of creaking rowlocks. He shipped the oars and waved a warning hand to Yegor. The latter froze in the stern with the net in his hands. The measured creaking came nearer and nearer.

"Someone's coming up in a boat," Trifon whispered shakily.

"Don't get panicky!" Yegor said, waving him to silence while he strained his ears. "The inspector has a motor boat, and this is an ordinary fishing-boat. Can't you hear the oars splashing?"

"If it was fishers, they'd be shooting the net now, but these are coming up on the quiet," Trifon insisted.

It struck Yegor that his pal was right. This was no ordinary fishing-boat creeping up along the dam. They would have to get away. But how could they—on a loaded boat, with the narrow passage out of Zamanukha already cut off? Give up the boat with its valuable load and make a bolt for the woods? No, that wouldn't do.

Yegor pushed Trifon aside and sat down to the oars himself. He drove the boat towards the right bank, hoping to escape unobserved and hide the fish at the ferry. But the boat no sooner swung into the current than a sharp command rang out in the darkness: "Stop!"

"Like fun I will!" Yegor thought with aaching fury. His breath coming in hoarse gasps, he tugged at the oars with all his might, driving the boat downstream and hugging the bank. The other boat, however, having the advantage of the fairway, swiftly shot ahead of him and started to cut across his path, drawing closer at every second.

"Stop, I tell you!" came a second shot, and Yegor recognized Zubov's voice.

"Zubov, the bastard!" he threw out grimly to his pal.

Yegor veered off from the bank and began to row frantically towards the dam. The boat plunged wildly over the turbulent water. It resembled a hunted wolf brought to bay and ready to turn upon its pursuer and sink its fangs in his throat.

"For the last time I tell you—stop!" Zubov yelled.

Yegor's boat was approaching the dam. Trifon, lying in the stern and clutching the slippery gunwales, was shaking with terror. He could now clearly distinguish the figure of the fishery inspector in the boat, which was bearing down on them with relentless swiftness, and realized that the game was up.

"Let's pull up," he groaned. "He'll start shooting, damn him!"

Yegor, his teeth bared in a snarl, shot a glance back. The dam loomed dark within ten yards of him.

"It's all up!" he shouted to Trifon. "Sink the boat!"

"You're crazy!" Trifon cried, jumping up.

But Yegor had already thrown himself against the side. The boat shipped a wave and began to sink. The two men dived into the water and struck out downstream making for the ferry.

When Zubov and Prokhorov arrived on the spot where the boat had sunk, all they found was a white foam of fish-slime floating on the surface and insensible fish drifting downstream.

"They've got away, damn them!" Prokhorov said regretfully. "Sunk the boat and escaped."

"We ought to take a look at that boat in the morning," Vasili said. "We'll be able to tell who it was."

"It won't tell us anything," Prokhorov said in a hopeless tone. "They might have been fishing in someone else's boat. To-morrow they may take my boat for all we know. No, that's no proof."

Meanwhile Yegor and Trifon had clambered ashore, and without stopping to wring out their clothes, had run straight home through the back-gardens.

"Instead of making money I lost my boots in the water," Yegor muttered savagely.

He listened to the faint lapping of the water against the bank, spat, and shook his fist. "You wait! I'll get even with you!"

After the confiscation of the second team's catch and the night affair at Zamanukha, Zubov decided to have a talk with Antropov. They met in the kolkhoz yard, and Vasili learned that a meeting of the kolkhoz fishermen was to be held in the club on Wednesday evening, at which the Secretary of the District Party Committee, Nazarov, would be present.

"There's a man who can really give you good advice," Antropov said earnestly. "Everyone round here respects him, and he knows district affairs and all our people as if he'd looked into their souls with a spy-glass."

"I'd like to have a talk with him and the fishermen," Vasili said. "That Likhachov has created such an atmosphere here that people are beginning to look daggers at me, thinking that I do nothing but interfere with their work."

"Oh, that's laying it on a bit thick, my dear chap," Antropov said with a smile. "If two or three fools are giving you trouble, that doesn't mean everybody. Our fishers are decent fellows. Quick on the uptake, too—you just have a chat with them. Tikhon Filippovich likes to thresh things out for himself, too, and he'll help you."

"Who's Tikhon Filippovich?"

"Nazarov, our Party Secretary. I'll get the Party members together for a confab in the office before the general meeting, so's they can tell the meeting their views."

Vasili spent two days preparing for the meeting. Sitting in his cubby-hole of a room, he went through *Fish Husbandry* magazines, old lectures and abstracts, newspaper cuttings, and instructions and regulations concerning fish preservation and culture.

In the late afternoon he went out for a walk in the stanitsa. The fishermen were coming in from the grounds to attend the meeting. Children tumbled out with shouts

to meet them. The youngsters padded about over the still moist sandy ground with bare feet, sidled round the fishermen, and peeped into their baskets, bubbling over with joy and excitement.

A group of old fishermen sat on stone slabs outside the big club-house exchanging tittle-tattle. Among them were old Yona, the centenarian, of whose age the whole stanitsa was proud and who still retained a clear mind and memory, Grandpa Shrimp, Ksenofont Sidorov, the leader of the transport team, and two fishermen of less venerable age who worked as smokers in the curing-shop.

Vasili observed a stranger sitting among the fishermen in a rather threadbare officer's great-coat with a forage-cap on his knees. He bent his close-cropped head and listened with a smile to something old Yona was saying. His figure and the expression of his face were arresting. He was tall and rather heavily built, and his face, with its puffy eyelids and chapped lips with deep lines of fatigue at the corners, was enlivened by the youthful sparkle of twinkling, shrewd eyes.

Zubov sat down on one of the slabs and asked the man next to him: "Who is that?"

The latter answered in an undertone: "Secretary of the District Party Committee."

Grandpa Yona, leaning over to the Secretary and tapping his cherry-wood stick, was saying: "So they started to haul in the net. It was pitch dark, you couldn't see a thing, then all of a sudden something cried out: 'Caw! Caw!' The boys dropped the net like a hot potato and scrambled off to their shanties. They woke up the gangsmen and began yelling that they'd caught Old Nick in the net!"

The fishermen burst out laughing. The Secretary joined in the laugh, revealing a row of strong even teeth.

"And what happened next?" he asked.

"They went down to the river all in a bunch and held a council of war as to how to handle that evil spirit and what sort of Mumbo Jumbo to use to lay him."

"And what did he do?" Nazarov asked with a chuckle.

"Who?"

"Old Nick."

"Oh, he gave no sign of life," the old man said with a shake of his head. "So long as no one touched him, he lay quiet. They sat around there till morning, and when the light began to break, the mystery cleared up at once. It was a pochard—got caught in the meshes, and just sat there more dead than alive. When the boys began to draw in the net, he got scared and yelled out. That much for Old Nick."

Nazarov laughed heartily over the old man's story, then went into the club with the rest of the fishermen.

The meeting began at seven sharp.

The club was packed to overflowing. People crowded on the benches, sat on the window-sills, and huddled in the doorways, while the youngsters squatted right on the floor. Zubov, who was standing by a window, noticed Grunya Prokhorova in the third row. Next to her sat a young girl with black hair, and behind, lolling in his seat and smoking a cigarette, was Yegor Talalayev. The fishermen and women, neatly dressed, with a festive air about them and somewhat solemn, self-conscious movements, came into the hall, looked round for a place to squeeze in, settled down noisily, and exchanged remarks with one another.

There was only one item on the agenda—the fulfilment of the spring fishing plan.

The speaker was Kuzma Mosolov. He laid a paper-case on the desk in front of him, cleared his throat, and began his speech. He cited figures concerning the fish catches, mentioned the sizes and quality of the various nets received from the motor-fishing station, and quoted

long passages from the instructions of the fishery authorities.

According to Mosolov's report, the fishery would be able to fulfil the catch plan ahead of schedule and devote the last quarter to overfulfilment in competition with the Sudachi fishermen.

His disabled arm resting in a black sling and his military decorations glinting impressively, Mosolov glanced now at the audience, now at the presidium—chiefly at the Secretary of the D.P.C.

"Though our section, by all signs, is fished out," he said, "we hope nevertheless to do our duty by the state this year as we've done in previous years."

"What were the landings on your area in 1936?" Nazarov suddenly asked with a sly twinkle.

"In 'thirty-six?" Mosolov queried, taken aback. "But that was a long time ago, Tikhon Filippovich, and I wasn't chairman then."

Antropov leaned over to the Secretary and said something to him in an undertone.

Nazarov jotted something down on his pad and nodded to Mosolov: "Go on, Kuzma Fedorovich."

The latter cleared his throat, shuffled the papers on the desk, and wound up in a louder voice: "Spring close-time will soon come into effect in our area, and all our fishermen and craft will go downstream to fish in the creeks. Naturally, all the fishing done in the creeks will go to fulfil our plan, and we—er—are sure that our fishing teams will—er—so to speak—come off with flying colours."

Mosolov picked up the paper-case with one hand, resumed his seat at the platform table, and nervously lit a cigarette, striking the match on the box wedged between his knees.

Zhigayev, a small swarthy man, who was presiding at the meeting, asked the fishermen: "Anybody want to speak?"

There was silence for a while, and the chairman had to repeat his question. Pimen Talalayev raised his hand and asked for the floor. He went up to the platform, his immaculate leather high-boots creaking, passed a sinewy hand over his perspiring bald head, and turned a red, puffy face to the hall.

"You just watch Uncle Pimen lay into Zubov," Yegor Talalayev said to his neighbour on the right, and shot a glance at Grunya.

"Well, Comrades," the team-leader began, "our chiefs are calling on us to do our best to see the plan through."

He paused to unbutton the collar of his white shirt, then seeking out Zubov with his eyes, he went on:

"But, speaking frankly, Comrades, there are people here who don't let us get on with the job. For instance, our district fishery inspector. Saturday morning he confiscated the whole day's catch of the second team. If you ask him why, he'll tell you the team overfished on smalls. Did Comrade Zubov act right or wrong? I say wrong, because the catch plan is not a plaything. The fishers didn't sleep day and night, wading in the water and giving their last ounce of strength to supply the country with fish, as the speaker just put it, while the inspector goes and sabotages——"

"The inspector was right!" a voice rang out from the back of the hall.

"Who's that heckling?" Zhigayev said, rapping the table with his pencil.

Stepan Khudyakov, clad in his invariable pea-jacket and cross-barred shirt, got up.

"Me, a fisherman of that same team that didn't sleep day and night and waded in the water. We told the team-leader the evening before that the young fishes should be turned back into the river, but he ordered us to empty the net into the barge and said townsfolk would eat

whatever you gave them anyway, so why waste time sorting out the fish."

A titter ran through the hall. Pimen Talalayev cast a flustered look at the D.P.C. Secretary. The latter sat back in his chair, and it was hard to guess from his expression whether he approved or disapproved of Khudyakov's interruption. He merely snapped open his cigarette-case, took out a cigarette, toyed with it, then asked right across the hall: "Is that your own opinion, Comrade Khudyakov?"

"No, most of the team feel the same way, Tikhon Filipovich," the fisherman answered.

Talalayev tapped the desk with the edge of his hand and scowled.

"I've got no personal interest in the matter," he said, blowing out his cheeks. "I've got nothing against the inspector. Only he ought to think of the fishermen's interests and the catch plan, otherwise we'll ruin our chances and lose the competition."

Talalayev was followed by three fishermen of his team, who took the floor one after another. They said the inspector had acted within his rights in confiscating the catch, although, of course, it was an unpleasant thing for the fishermen.

"We only have ourselves to blame," the third fisherman concluded. "You can't get away with cheating, and that's what it amounts to—we've cheated the state and ourselves."

"Maybe the fishery inspector would like to say something?" Nazarov said, glancing in Zubov's direction.

Vasili was taken by surprise. This direct appeal meant that the Secretary knew him by sight, and he wondered how that could be when they had never met before.

Zubov, forgetting all about his notes and abstracts, went up to the platform.

Before him was practically the whole population of

the floating stanitsa, people whose lives from the cradle to the grave were bound up with the river, which in the old days had drunk the blood of many fishermen. Many a father and grandfather of theirs had drowned in that river and been swept out into the grey shallow sea. Many a fisherman had been shot by the ubiquitous river police, the lifelong enemy of the intrepid poaching gangs.

Vasili looked at the young and old faces that were turned to him, and began to speak in a voice that betrayed his emotion.

"It was a very unpleasant thing for me, Comrades, to confiscate the fish catch from the second team. I had no alternative. The Government has imposed upon me a responsible and difficult task—to protect the river's fish stocks, which belong to the whole Soviet people. All the fishermen in our country have long been united in fishing kolkhozes. It is their job to run the fishing industry."

He paused, and meeting Grunya's encouraging look, went on with more confidence. "Our business is not just to catch fish, but to run fish husbandry, direct it, improve it, and increase the fish harvest.... Yes, increase the yield year by year and make the biggest possible hauls. This can be done only if we rigidly observe the fishery regulations, preserve millions of fish fry, and actively carry on artificial propagation. It's easy enough to cast a net and land fish. That is how our grandfathers ran things on the river, but we can't run things that way, because we're not the same people—we're Soviet people. We must learn to sow fish, cultivate it, and catch as much as we need of it.

"I want to tell you how the Americans run their fishing industry. Some fifty years ago the coastal waters of America teemed with halibut, which is a valuable food-fish. So long as the Indians caught it, there was plenty of it. But then the American colonizers drove the Indians off the coast into the most barren lands and ran a

railroad down to the sea. The whole seaboard became alive with fishing-schooners. They threw themselves on that poor halibut like wolves. They built fishing ports on the coast—Vancouver and Seattle—and landed the fish there in billions. They hunted the halibut without restriction day and night, spring and summer, violating all protective regulations and using all and every means of capture you could think of. Within thirty years halibut had all but disappeared.”

“What a shame!” someone exclaimed in the hall.

“In our Soviet land with its kolkhoz system,” Vasili continued, “such methods of fish husbandry are impossible. But”—he took a sheet of paper out of his pocket, held it up to the light, then went on, looking into the hall—“we sometimes forget what is written down in the kolkhoz statute, while here is what it says: ‘The kolkhoz undertakes strictly to observe the existing fishing regulations, to assist the authorities in safeguarding reservoirs, and to combat illegal fishing in preservation areas, the capture of fish fry and under-sized fish, the use of prohibited tackle and means of capture, and violations of the established close-seasons.’ In addition the fishing kolkhoz undertakes ‘to engage in fish propagation in natural reservoirs and ponds, and to take necessary measures for preserving young fish and improving spawning-grounds and breeding-homes in natural reservoirs.’ ”

Vasili put the paper back into his pocket and asked the fishermen in the hall: “Did you adopt these statutes, Comrades?”

A chorus of voices rang out in the darkened hall: “Of course we did!” “We discussed it at the general meeting!” “Discussed it and adopted it!”

Vasili dropped into an intimate, pleading tone such as he used with his parents in childhood when he needed their help.

"It's very difficult for me," he said. "I want you to help me by electing a public fishery inspectorate from among yourselves. The Government has long since endorsed the instructions for the organization and activities of such inspectorates. They exist in all the leading kolkhozes. After all, it's as much your business as it is mine to look after the fish."

"Hear, hear!" came voices. "Let's elect public inspectors!"

Nazarov, the D.P.C. Secretary, spoke last. He had listened patiently and attentively to the fishermen, asked them questions, jotted down notes with a red pencil, and when the debates were drawing to a close, he asked for the floor.

Nazarov was obviously agitated. Thrusting his hands inside the broad belt drawn tightly about his blue tunic, he paced up and down the platform, peering into the darkened hall.

"Communism, Comrades, will develop all the powers and abilities of man," he said quietly. "And this will come about all the quicker the more rationally we work for the morrow."

Turning to Mosolov, Nazarov said with a smile: "What do you think, Kuzma Fedorovich, will there be fishermen under communism? There will. In that case, we'll need plenty of fish, too, eh? We'll need it just as we need bread, fruit, vegetables, geese, sheep—everything a man consumes. But there will have to be more of all that under communism, much more than we have now. Isn't that so?" The Secretary was now facing the hall again. "We must start looking for practical ways of achieving this right now, to-day! We must find new methods of planning fish husbandry and breeding the finest kinds of fish. We must raise our catches by hard work, not tongue-wagging." He gave an angry cough and turned again to Mosolov, who sat fidgeting in his chair.

"You intend to catch less fish this spring than you did before. Isn't that so?"

"Yes, Tikhon Filippovich," Mosolov muttered. "But we get our quota from the regional centre. Besides, there's less fish in the river."

"Less?" Nazarov echoed. "And who's to blame? You think the Party won't find the culprit? Oh yes it will—whether he's in the district, the region, or at ministerial headquarters. The Party, Comrade Mosolov, will find a way of napping the knuckles of those fish pedlars who don't see farther than their noses. We must drag out by the ears those window-dressers and bureaucrats who cannot lead the country's fish husbandry towards communism.

"A new inspector has been appointed here," the Secretary continued more quietly. "We've got to help him. You have a sound, healthy kolkhoz. Go ahead then and switch it over to new tracks. Give the young folks a chance to show what they can do! Put a stop to wasteful fishing. Think of to-morrow, Comrades, but don't wait for it with folded hands—bring that day nearer by honest hard work and thrift."

The fishermen, smoking *makhorka* cigarettes, exchanged glances and nodded approval throughout Nazarov's speech.

When Vasili, with the rest of the crowd, came out on to the stone porch, he stopped under the lighted lantern, letting the animated throng drift past, while his eyes sought out Grunya. She was already in the court-yard and Yegor Talalayev was sidling around her. Seeing Vasili, she invented an excuse to go back into the club and ran up the steps. Nearing Vasili, she slackened her pace.

"Good evening, Grunya," Vasili said cheerfully. "Going home?"

"Yes, Vasili Kirillovich," the girl said, blushing.

"I've been looking for you," Vasili said artlessly.

She guessed by the flustered expression of his face that he hoped to see her home, as indeed he did, walking beside her and gently supporting her by the elbow.

On that balmy spring night filled with the fragrance of rain, it seemed to Vasili that the slight girl who walked at his side with a little white scarf thrown negligently over her shoulders, the girl he had so eagerly sought out in the darkness, meant more to him than anyone else, and that he would very much like her to know it, too. But he could not bring himself to tell her about it. With joy and humility in his heart, he walked beside Grunya, talking softly of all manner of things, which, though pleasant enough in themselves, were not the things he wanted to say to her.

CHAPTER THREE

1

Spring was ruling the roost on the river. The sun grew steadily hotter. The swollen buds were beginning to burst. The branches of trees and the flood meadow turned a delicate green, and white fleece draped the riverside willows. The cold "lower" water had flowed out to the sea, carrying away all traces of the ice-drift. In the upper reaches of the river, north of the chalk hills of Divnogorye, and around the great Volga plateau, the sun-warmed "upper" water flowed down the hill-sides in countless streams of melted snow. Slowly and irresistibly the freshets ran down to the delta, which thrust its rushy tentacles into the sea.

The river rose day by day. First the riverside shoals and sand-banks disappeared, then the flaky faces of the higher banks and the white foam of the willow blossoms were submerged. Still the water kept rising, seething under the bluffs, washing away the alluvial deposits, and rushing through the creeks in all directions. Finally, overflowing its banks, it sped in a gay blue tide over the boundless Don flood lands, inundating stanitsas, woods, fields, orchards, vineyards—everything that stood in its path.

The Golubovskaya fishermen were leaving the stanitsa. Close-time had come into effect on the middle reaches

of the river. It was the height of the spawning-season, and all the fishing kolkhozes were moving downstream.

Marfa was going out, too, and before taking leave of Vasili, she told him that she had made arrangements with Osipovna, her old aunt, to come every other day and cook meals for him and Vitya, who, despite his eagerness to go down to the creeks, was left in the stanitsa.

Clad in fisherman's oilskins, blue overalls, and clumsy high-boots, with a crimson kerchief tied maiden-fashion on her head, Marfa stood leaning against the door-jamb, saying to Vasili with smiling eyes:

"Now don't be lonely, Vasya. There'll still be lots of nice girls here. And don't just keep chasing up and down the river in your motor boat or poring over your books. It's ridiculous." She sighed and gave Vasili her small strong hand. "Good-bye, Vasili Kirillovich."

Vasili rose, took his belt off the back of a chair, and cried after her: "I'll catch up with you, Marfa Panteleyevna! I'll go and see the fishermen off."

By the time he got out into the street Marfa was a good distance away. Holding a basket with her things, she walked with a light girlish step. Vasili overtook her and relieved her of the basket.

The whole stanitsa gathered on the bank.

Edged with young greenery, golden-tinted with dancing sunbeams, the river seemed to palpitate with the sheer joy of living. And the faces of the fishermen crowding on the steep bank shone with the same joy.

The freshly tarred fishing-boats loaded with nets, baskets, long poles, buckets, tool-boxes, and other requisites, lay drawn up in a line at the submerged moorings. In each boat stood a huge cauldron, black with the smoke of camp-fires, from which many a generation of Golubovskaya fishermen had eaten rich fish stew, *sharba*, with relish.

Rocking on the water next to the fishing-boats stood wherries and row-boats taken in tow. They, too, were packed with baskets, cases, heaps of clothes, sacks of flour and bread, and other odds and ends.

Vasili and Marfa arrived just when the fishermen were embarking.

The bank was lined with men, women, and meddlesome youngsters. Even Grandpa Yona, the centenarian, came out to see off his two sons, six grandsons, and four granddaughters-in-law. Looking at the buzzing crowd, Vasili caught sight of Grunya. She was standing with Yegor Talalayev, listening to his chatter with a smile. She had seen that Vasili had come with Marfa and that he had taken her basket ahead. A slight frown puckered the girl's forehead. She turned her back on Vasili and carried on a still livelier conversation with Yegor. Then she walked off with him, casting sidelong glances at Vasili.

Zubov saw nothing of this, but it was not lost on Marfa. She touched Vasili's elbow and said casually: "Do you like that girl, Vasya?"

"What girl?" he said absent-mindedly.

"Grunya Prokhorova. There she is, walking with Pimen's nephew. They seem to be having quite an interesting chat. Nice girl, isn't she, Vasya?"

"I don't know, Marfa Panteleyevna. Never thought about it," Zubov muttered gloomily.

Mosolov, Antropov, Pimen Talalayev, and three members of the kolkhoz board went past, engaged in loud conversation. Mosolov glanced at the sunny river with its flooded banks, consulted his watch with a preoccupied air, and said: "Well, boys, it's time to get under way!"

There was a great stir and bustle. Taking hasty leave of the women, old men, and children, the fishermen filed aboard the boats. Grandpa Shrimp's women's team got

into the last boat. The oarsmen, strapping, ruddy-faced young men, took their places. Mosolov, standing on the bank, waved his hand to the team-leaders.

"Good luck! Happy fishing!"

Antropov, who was in charge of the expedition, shouted: "Shove off!"

The oars swung back, and the fishing-boats, rocking on the high water with creaking rowlocks, glided down the river. Vasili, standing on the bluff and holding on to a wattle fence, watched Marfa's crimson kerchief fluttering in the last boat until the caravan passed out of sight.

The crowd on the bank began to break up. Vasili sat down and lit a cigarette.

An osprey was circling over the river, its powerful wings spread wide and its talons steeled for the kill. The bird's wicked, yellowish eyes were fixed on the surface of the water, watchful of every movement and ripple. With a gleam of snow-white under-plumage, its rapacious brown-crested head bent sideways, it described a few circles over the river, then suddenly hung poised in mid air, folded its wings, and dropped like a stone. A lightning stroke, a splash—and the bird, with a heavy flap of its mottled wings, cleared the water, bearing away in its iron talons a fluttering razor-fish.

"Now that's a poacher!" Vasili thought, smiling despite himself. "A regular dive-bomber!"

Grunya and Yegor Talalayev, coming up from the vineyards, approached him from behind before he was aware of their presence. Yegor was not very keen on meeting Zubov, but yielding to Grunya, he went along with her, his hand tucked importantly into the lapel of his smart jacket. Grunya, with her jacket thrown over her shoulders, and soft sports shoes fitting snugly on her feet, went up to Zubov noiselessly and said in a low tone: "Feeling lonely after the send-off, Vasili Kirillovich?"

Vasili started and turned round swiftly, but recovering himself, he answered curtly: "How d'you do, Grunya? Yes, I am feeling lonely after the send-off."

The girl took Yegor's arm and led him up to Zubov.

"This is Yegor Avdeyevich Talalayev, chief electrician of the lock, our team-leader's nephew."

"Glad to meet you," Zubov said unsmilingly. "I think I've met your friend before, Grunya."

"Where could you have met me, Comrade Inspector?" Yegor said with a flash of his gypsy eyes. "I don't seem to remember."

Vasili turned to Grunya without answering him.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Grunya?"

The girl flushed nervously, and snapped a dry twig which she was holding behind her back.

"No, Vasili Kirillovich," she said curtly, "there isn't. I—er—just. . . . I'm sorry we troubled you. . . . Good-bye."

Leaving both Vasili and Yegor, she picked her way swiftly between the rows of vine stakes and disappeared among the willow thickets. Talalayev ran after her.

"What did she want, I wonder?" Vasili thought moodily. "If she goes out with that electrician of hers, it's her business. But what does she want of me?"

For all that, Vasili experienced a bitter feeling of resentment and jealousy.

"I'll never go to the Prokhorovs again," he told himself. "And I won't meet her any more."

But while saying this to himself, he thought of Grunya's dark eye-lashes, her charming pouting mouth, and her small shapely feet on which the sports shoes sat so snugly. And the more he thought of it, the worse he tormented himself. "No, I won't go, not for anything in the world. I won't even speak to her. I don't care for her at all."

Meanwhile Yegor had caught up with the girl and was walking beside her. Glancing at her distressed face,

he began hesitatingly: "I want to tell you something, Grunya. . . . I've been wanting to tell you this for a long time, but I didn't have a chance. Maybe this won't interest you much, but that's your business. I've been waiting for this chance over a year, only I was afraid to risk it. . . ."

Yegor, usually so cock-sure, stammered and floundered, and Grunya, without looking at him, asked: "What is it you want, Yegor Avdeyevich?"

"Your love, Grunya darling," Yegor blurted out. He seemed to have thrown off a heavy load, and went on in his usual devil-may-care tone: "I'm working at the lock, got a decent job, make good money. Dad and I live alone, and he's got one foot in the grave, as the saying goes. We have a nice little house with weatherboarding, and a one-acre plot, an apple orchard of twelve trees, and twenty vines . . . well, and a cow, of course, and a houseful of junk. . . ."

He took Grunya's arm, and his black gypsy eyes scorched her face.

"In short, that house of mine needs a mistress, Grunya. I've decided to marry, all right and proper at the registrar's. . . ."

"So what of it?" Grunya said with a shrug. "Where do I come in?"

"You're just the answer to my prayer," Yegor laughed. "And I'm waiting for your verdict."

"What verdict, Yegor Avdeyevich?"

Yegor stopped and barred the girl's path. With a sudden movement of his strong arms, he drew her to him, gripped her by the shoulders, and went on in a suppressed voice: "I've taken a fancy to you, Grunya. I can't get a wink of sleep through you. Will you be my wife? I mean it honestly, all legal and proper."

He drew her closer and pressed his hot dry mouth to her lips.

"Oh, what are you doing!" Grunya cried, startled. "Let me go! I'll scream if you don't! D'you hear? How dare you!"

She tore herself out of his embrace and ran behind a vine bush sparsely covered with young leaves.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself!" she cried in a passion. "Showing off your strength, like a bully!"

"What do you mean strength? Can't a man have a lark?"

Grunya jumped over the wattle fence and ran off to the stanitsa without looking back.

2

The river kept rising day by day. The blossoming willows at Poplar Wood were already submerged to their crowns, Maid Meads had disappeared under the water which, making its way through barely perceptible hollows, was rushing down on the stanitsa. Sweeping away the wattle fences and swamping the earthen barriers which the villagers had thrown up, the warm water, glittering in the sunshine, flooded the broad streets, poured into wells and cellars, tore up the planks of porch steps, smashed ground-floor windows, and poured into cottage basements, from which prudent dwellers had removed all the domestic lumber.

Stacks of last year's hay, uprooted trees, and streaming ricks of straw drifted in the boundless flood valley. The villagers barely had time to release the bellowing cattle from the flooded pens and drive them out to Sandy Rise, a wide-topped hill with sloping sides which stood above the flooded meadow like an island in a blue sea. Luckily the road to Sandy Rise lay along a ridge which ran straight as an arrow, and the oxen, horses, cows, sheep, and goats were driven up without difficulty. The

large Golubovskaya herd grazed on this ridge, nibbling the young grass.

The whole of Golubovskaya was now flooded from end to end. Only the top bars of the submerged fences were visible. The masonry bases of the houses were under water. Cocks crowed in the tree-tops and on the roofs where the frightened fowls sat out the flood, and cater-wauling tom-cats strutted about among them with tails erect, squeamishly shaking their wet paws. Dogs cowered at the upper doors, and the more adventurous plunged in and swam with lolling tongues.

A small light wherry stood moored at every house, and when people had need to visit the rural Soviet, the co-op store, or the kolkhoz office, they got into their boats and paddled down the streets, raising rainbow sprays with their oars. After the departure of the fishing teams, all the remaining villagers, men and women, put on rubber waders. Here and there they found spots where they could cross the streets knee-deep in the water.

On Sundays a floating market was held in the stanitsa square between the chemist's shop and the collective-farm office. The farm-women came in boats, bringing crocks of clotted cream, bottled milk, potatoes, salted fish, and eggs. The customers, adroitly propelling their light craft, manoeuvred among the flooded market-stalls, bought what they needed, and paddled back to their homes.

Vasili had never seen anything of the kind before. With Vitya's help he repaired Marfa's old boat and paddled all day about the flooded stanitsa. The village orchards, standing in the water, had blossomed, and their slender branches, studded with a white cloud of fragrant petals, were mirrored in the placid sky-blue water. Bumble-bees, heavy with food and a sweet languor, hovered listlessly round the trees with a low drone. A gentle spring breeze wafted over the stanitsa

the heady odour of blossoming trees, grass, and moist warm earth.

Occasionally Zubov went out on the motor boat with the under-inspector.

The trim *Sterlet* flew across the watery expanse like a cannon-ball, leaving a spumous fan-like track. The water seemed without end. It spread in a sweeping placid tide all the way to the distant Donets heights looming on the horizon, covering hills, hollows, creeks, lakes, and water holes, and reflecting the blue serenity of the shining sky.

"Isn't it beautiful, Vasili Kirillovich!" Prokhorov murmured, scanning the boundless expanse of water. "Mind you, I was born here and have grown old here, you might say, but I can never stop admiring the place. I think there's no finer spot in the world."

"It is beautiful, Ivan Nikanorovich!" Vasili said.

"I should say so! Wonderful place to live in."

Glancing at Zubov with meek watery eyes, the under-inspector went on with sentimental emotion: "But it's not all paradise here, you know. Soon we'll be having the midges, swarms of them. There's no hiding from them. And after that we'll get the gnats. Soon as the sun goes down they start plaguing you, fit to drive you mad. You'd be surprised how our folks love the place. You couldn't drive them out of here with midges, gnats, floods, or anything! They're used to it!"

Several times during his assistant's fervent speech, Vasili was on the verge of asking him about Grunya, but he checked himself and spoke about something else.

In this way he spent whole days on the fast *Sterlet*, making notes of spawning progress in his diary.

With the river in spate, the spawning-season was at its height.

The burbot had spawned first, while the ice was still breaking up. Next to spawn was the sea-roach, then the

ide and the rudd, and finally, the most important of marketable food-fishes—the pike-perch, bream, sheatfish, carp, and herring.

The first to leave its hibernating holes and go galivanting under the ice was the bream. This reveller is not a sound sleeper even in the winter, and in warm winters it does not sit still at all, but goes for a spin round the deep pools and under the bluffs. With the approach of spring weather the breams move out in batches to the spawning-beds, seeking quiet shallow places with meadow grasses. The “cold breams,” which wintered in the river, celebrate their wedding first, and then the bulk of “warm breams,” sensing the approach of the sun-warmed “upper” water, come up out of the bay and the sea in a mass.

Sometimes the shoal of breams is led by an old experienced “chieftain”—a huge fish with large scales yellowed to a golden hue by age, almost as large as a twenty-kopek coin. The fishermen, if they chance to net such a “chieftain,” will always throw him back into the river in the belief that he will bring another shoal of breams back to the same place.

The bream is a cautious fish. It will go off at the slightest noise, and not return again for a long time.

“In the old days,” Grandpa Yona told Vasili, “when the bream was running, the fishermen used to ask the village priest not to ring the church bells on holidays so’s not to scare away the spawning fish. The priest had to give in; the bream’s such a scary, crotchety fish, you know.”

Grandpa Yona, with whom Vasili was fond of having a talk, preferred the carp to all other fish. He spoke about it with such rapture and got so excited that a faint tinge of colour suffused his seamed, withered cheeks.

“The carp—now that’s a fish!” he would say, shaking his head and clucking his tongue. “A fish to beat all fish! King of the Don!”

"But there are other good fishes besides the carp, Grandpa," Vasili protested. "Take the beluga, or the sturgeon, or the sterlet! And what's wrong with the bream!"

"It's not the thing, son, no!" the old man mouthed. "The carp, now that's a fish! The rest don't count—just rubbish!"

And he went on telling Vasili things about the life and habits of the carp in such detail that one could think he had lived his hundred years under the water with the carps as his next-door neighbours.

"When it starts getting cold," the old man said, "the carps go in search of wintering-places. They eat little then, and their skins get covered with slime—they sort of put on an overcoat, you know. Well, after they've found a sand-bank or a hole, say, they start making themselves at home. Sometimes it happens that sheat-fish are sleeping there, like bears in their dens, with their noses stuck in the ooze. In the summer the carp wouldn't dare to tackle the sheat-fish—that fellow'd open his jaws and make short work of him—but in winter it's quite another pair of shoes. The sheat-fish lie in hundreds, stacked like a wood-pile—you could dance on them. Well, the carps nose around a bit, and then they lie down on the sheat-fish one on top of the other. And so they sleep through the winter in two floors—the carps on top and the sheat-fish underneath.

"Soon as the ice begins to melt," old Yona went on, shutting his eyes, "the carp wakes up in his winter lair. At first he doesn't go far from the hole, just takes a stroll nearby, but afterwards, when the sun gets warm and the "upper" water starts coming down, the carp goes out a-wooing."

The old man, warming to his subject, dropped into a sibilant whisper and clutched Vasili's arm.

"The carp goes a-spawning with a bang, like a

Cossack on the spree. If he has to get over a sand-bank, say, he just chucks himself out of the water and flops back again, and mind you, he does it all with zest, just in rollicking fun...."

Vasili, listening to Yona's endless stories, watched the play of emotions on his dark face with its parchment-like skin, and saw it light up with animation as the old man inhaled the scents of spring.

Spring was coming into its own. Spawning fish were already scurrying about all over the flood meadows of the great river. The hotter the sun grew, the larger became the schools of huge sheat-fish, which swam out to their breeding-homes looking like so many moss-grown logs. Countless shoals of glittering, blue-tinged herrings ascended the river.

All over the vast expanse of water, in which was reflected the fathomless blue sky, the fishes were celebrating mating-time, which, though no human eye could witness it, was no less turbulent and full of commotion than the awakening of spring itself.

At the height of the spawning-season there came myriads of midges. The tiny creatures filled the air and seemed to be coming out of the watery abyss in endless streams. There was no escaping them. Like sand raised by a whirlwind, they swarmed round the grazing herds, got into the nostrils, ears, and eyes of man and beast, penetrated into every fold of clothing, perished by the million, but instantly reappeared in still greater hordes, as though making up in quantity what they lacked in magnitude, winning for themselves a place under the sun by sheer force of numbers.

All the villagers went about with bits of fishing-net impregnated with kerosene thrown over their heads. These nets kept the midges away, more or less, as long as the acrid smell lasted, but no sooner did the net dry than the midges attacked their victim in clouds, getting under his

clothes, down his collar, into his hair, and up his sleeves, every bite causing an intolerable itch.

The children were the worst sufferers. They did not have the patience to bear the itching and scratched their cheeks, necks, legs, and hands until they bled.

"This beastly nuisance will go on until the darning-needles come," old Osipovna, who came to do the cooking in place of Marfa, reassured Vasili.

"Darning-needles?" Vasili queried, his swollen face wincing with pain.

"Why, yes. That's what we call dragon-flies here. They'll make short work of the midges, gobble them all up in no time."

"When will those darning-needles come?" Vasili asked, an agony of longing in his voice.

The old woman, chewing her lips, answered off-handedly: "In a month, maybe, or a month and a half. All depends."

One Sunday Vasili decided to take a run down to the flood meadow with his gun and watch the wild ducks on Kuzhnoye Lake. The lake abounded in big mallards which were now nesting, hidden from sight, among the impenetrable rushes.

Yasha ran the purring *Sterlet* up to the door of Marfa's house. Covering his head with a bit of netting saturated in kerosene, Vasili took his gun and a bag containing bread and a lump of bacon, and the *Sterlet* sped down the stanitsa streets and across the flood meadows towards the blue rushes of Kuzhnoye Lake.

The motor boat reached the spot within fifteen minutes. Yasha switched off the engine, pulled his shirt over his face, and stretched himself out on the seat to take a nap. Vasili strapped the tops of his waterproof hip-boots to his cartridge-belt, thrust a piece of bread into the pocket of his faded blue overalls, and picking up his double-barrelled gun, waded into the thick of the rushes.

The sun blazed down, and midges hung over the lake in a dark cloud. The rushes, interspersed with last year's brittle yellow stalks, rose before Vasili in a wall, almost twice the height of a man. Vasili lost sight of the horizon as soon as he plunged into the thickets and had to take his bearings by the sun.

The going was very difficult; his feet caught in submerged snags, he had to part the thick rushes with his hands, which were scratched by the dry razor-sharp blades. The midges swarmed around him, but the acrid odour of the kerosene-drenched netting protected him from their stings.

Vasili had heard that there were patches of open water, communicating with one another and much frequented by the ducks, in the middle of the lake; but they were by no means easy to find, since there was not a single trail in the rushes, which stretched for several miles.

He wandered about in the thickets for quite a time until he finally came upon open water and decided to lie in wait there. He chose a spot between two patches of water, one of which was round, the other oblong in shape, cut down a pile of rushes with his knife, tied them in a sheaf, and made a seat for himself. Then he carefully camouflaged himself and sat down with his gun across his knees.

He did not have to wait long. In a quarter of an hour a big drake alighted on the water in the round patch, quite close to him. From somewhere among the rushes a duck quacked. The handsome drake began to preen himself for the meeting. Pearl-grey, with coffee-coloured breast, two rich blue patches on the wings and ringed curls on his restless tail, he proudly raised his brilliant, emerald-green, velvety head, then smoothed down every little feather with his broad beak, his dazzling white collar standing out vividly on his gracefully arched neck.

"How can you shoot such a beauty?" Vasili thought with a smile.

The drake took several turns on the water, then flapped his wings, and swam off towards his mate. A few minutes later the sound of their joyous quacking, the splash of the agitated water, and the creaking of the rushes reached Vasili's ears.

Here and there carps leapt to the surface. Vasili heard the characteristic clucking sound they made and watched them gambolling. He sat quite still on his sheaf of rushes, and the water all round him, placid now and limpid after the mud he had raised, revealed swarms of little fishes darting about like tiny arrows. He could not quite make out the species of these spry little youngsters, only recently hatched from the spawn.

Recalling his experiences of the last few months, Vasili found his thoughts harking back to his school-days, and it occurred to him that college with its laboratories, lectures, and so-called practical studies had not given him or his school-mates that knowledge of life which he had first acquired here, in this floating stanitsa where everything was so different from what he had imagined it to be.

"Yes, they taught me a good many things," Vasili mused. "They told me that eight per cent of fry in the catch was lawful, but they didn't warn me I'd be blamed for upsetting the fishery plan by trying to keep the rules."

His reverie was interrupted by a splash at the end of the oblong patch of water on his right.

The noise and splashing grew louder, and suddenly Grunya appeared out of the rushes.

She walked along, waving off the midges and tossing back her wet hair. Her lips comically pursed, she was watching the commotion among the shoals of baby fishes.

Sparkling drops of water trickled down her sunburnt hands.

She was so near that Vasili could see the pink mosquito bites on her neck and rosy cheeks. Vasili stared at the approaching girl with a pounding heart. She passed within three paces of him, and trampling down the prickly rushes with her bare feet, disappeared into the thickets.

Listening to the receding splash of the water and the rustle of the reeds, Vasili thought he had dreamt it, but suddenly Grunya began to sing in a low voice.

And as he listened to her singing, Vasili realized that he loved this girl, loved her with all his heart, as he loved the air, the white fragrant trees, the blithe birds, and this boundless flood in which were reflected the blue sky and the blazing, relentless sun.

She was already far away when he started after her. It was difficult to follow a human track in the dense thickets. Only the slowly rising stalks, recently crushed underfoot, told him what direction Grunya had taken. She had stopped singing, and Vasili went at random through the rushes, stumbling and straying. He got water into his boots and lost his head net.

They came upon each other in an open patch of water.

Grunya blushed crimson, glanced at Vasili from under puckered brows, and at a loss for words, murmured piteously: "The rushes are so prickly.... I've cut my legs...."

Vasili laughed softly. Bending down, he lifted Grunya in his arms and carried her through the water, walking sideways so as not to scratch her against the stiff rushes.

She put her arms trustingly round his neck and whispered unthinkingly: "Don't, Vasya...."

Deaf to her words, Vasili kissed her hair, her eyes and cheeks, while she struggled feebly, repeating: "Don't—I'll walk—I'm too heavy for you."

"Oh no, you're not," he said, filled with wonder and delight. "You aren't heavy at all. There's a path here. . . . I'll soon put you down. . . ."

He carried her to the path, placed her gently on her feet into the water, and they walked towards the motor boat hand in hand.

Vasili roused the sleeping motor-man. "Start her up, Yasha!" he cried gaily. "We'll take a run down the Donets."

The engine snorted like a restive horse, and the boat, raising a flaming golden foam, skimmed over the tidal waters towards the blue hills.

3

The Golubovskaya fishing kolkhoz received an express telegram from headquarters to make preparations for rescuing the fish fry. The catch plan worried Mosolov, and he called a meeting of the kolkhoz board at which he proposed that the job should be tackled without recalling the fishermen from downstream.

Zubov was invited to the meeting.

He found some fifteen men and women gathered in the large office. Mosolov had called out a group of Komsomol members, some of whom were working in Grunya's preservation team. Antropov and Grandpa Shrimp had come up from downstream for three days and they too were present. On a bench against the wall sat several elderly women.

Grunya stood by the window, listening moodily to Mosolov. Her face was flushed and her brows knit. She looked away into a corner, toying nervously with a strand of ash-blond hair.

Mosolov, with a glance at Zubov, who had just sat down, went on: "Since we're short-handed we can't do

more than we can. You don't expect me to take the fishermen off their jobs and put them on fry rescue! No one would allow me to do that. We'll have to manage as best we can. I can't risk the plan."

"It's always like that with us," Grunya interrupted him. "When it comes to saving the fish fry we can never get any help, because you, Kuzma Fedorovich, look on the thing as a child's game."

"Wait a minute, Prokhorova," the speaker brushed her aside. "I don't consider it a child's game at all, but what I can't do, I can't. We'll have to rally the Komsomol for fry rescue, and the old folks who have remained at home."

Grunya sniffed sarcastically. "That's right—rally Grandpa Yona, he'll do all the work for you."

The women laughed. Antropov smiled too. He asked for the floor and began to speak, drilling the chairman with his steely eyes.

"You've got to look at this thing from a business point of view, Kuzma Fedorovich. The catch plan is only part of the fishery's general production plan. This fry rescue business is not a game. Letting the kids run about the flood meadow with hoop-nets won't get us anywhere. We've got to dig ditches, do all the necessary reclamation work, prepare containers for transferring the fry in, provide the transport—in a word, make proper preparations."

His glance shifted from Mosolov to the youngsters sitting at the back of the room. They were apparently getting bored by the proceedings and were looking out of the window and talking in loud voices.

"The Komsomol will have to be mobilized, that's clear. Let the boys and girls take an active hand in fry rescue and compete with one another, keeping personal records. We'll hold them accountable. The school can lend a hand, too. They read lots of books in class, but

they can't tell a bream from a carp. It'll do the pupils and teachers good to put in a bit of work in their free time."

Antropov heaved a hoarse sigh and addressed the chairman directly.

"You ought to turn your office staff out on the flood meadow, too, Kuzma Fedorovich. Look how many of them we have sitting around—book-keepers, weighers, receivers, storekeepers, care-takers—a whole squad. They could easily spare some time to go out with a drag-net, get acquainted with the practical end of their job, and take a whiff of fresh air while they're at it. You're like so many herrings pickled in brine, sitting in your office tub without showing your nose out of it."

People began to smile and nod their heads in approval. Antropov's words had clearly hit the nail squarely on the head. Even Mosolov's face twisted into a vinegary smile, and he hastened to say: "You're quite right. We'll have to send the office staff out to the flood meadow."

Antropov's proposal was carried. Grunya Prokhorova was made responsible for saving the fish fry.

Tosya Belyavskaya, the Secretary of the Komsomol organization, assured the management that with the help of the District Komsomol Committee she had already made sure of the support of the young people of the stanitsa and the hamlets, and even the school children, who had offered to take part in the work.

Vasili and Grunya left the meeting together. It was getting dark, and they decided to take a stroll through the moonlit water. After their recent meeting in the rushes they no longer made a secret of their feelings when alone. They were at once thrilled and frightened by their growing intimacy, which imparted a warm and tender touch to their relations.

They went down the deserted street in silence, pressed close to each other.

The water glistened underfoot. The blossoming trees in the gardens, bathed in the light of a full moon, glimmered bluishly. Their delicate intoxicating scent spread over the sea-like expanse of the flood meadow.

The water grew deeper as they neared the river. In the first street it had been up to their ankles, rising by degrees until now, in the lane running down to the vineyards, it reached their knees.

"You're shorter than I am, and you'll soon have your boots full of water," Vasili said with a laugh. "Let's go back, it's shallower there."

"I will not!" Grunya said perversely. "My boots are just as high as yours."

She snatched her hand out of his and strode boldly through the water, lifting her feet high like a gosling. The water, however, grew deeper and Grunya stopped several times, looking back at Vasili in dismay.

"Another step and your boots will be full!" he cried. "Come back!"

"I won't!" Grunya laughed. "You're taller, but I'm braver."

Suddenly she stepped into a hole and the water gurgled round her knees.

"Oh!" she cried. "I'm drowning!"

Laughing, Vasili rushed up to her, snatched her up, and carried her back. She clasped him round the neck and pouted: "Your face is prickly—and you smell of tobacco—I'm not going to kiss you."

She drawled the last words teasingly, knowing full well that he would kiss her there and then. He bent over to do so, but she turned her face away, and put her hand on his mouth.

Vasili stopped, pressed the girl's cheek against his shoulder, and began kissing her. Her body grew limp and she held her face up to his with parted lips, returning his kisses.

He was standing by someone's fence and did not hear the sound of subdued giggling.

It was Tosya Belyavskaya, sitting on the porch with her friend, the buoy-keeper's daughter. She had seen the lovers and watched them until Vasili disappeared with his burden in the darkness.

"See that, Irina?" Tosya sighed. "That's what I call love. Carries her about in his arms like a baby."

The girls talked in low tones, and the moon shone over them, its bright disk painting an endless golden track across the still water. Somewhere far away the silence of some deep pool was broken by the splash of a frolicking fish. It would leap out of the water, glistening in the moonlight, fall flat upon its belly, then, with a playful flick of its tail, dive back into the depths, leaving rippling circles upon the water. Another fish would follow it with a splash, then a third and a fourth, and then silence would reign again, so deep and undisturbed that were one to put one's ear to the ground, it seemed one would hear the faint stirrings of all the tiny creatures living in the earth.

4

At college Zubov had often thought how upon coming to his place of work he would help the fishing kolkhoz to build a fish-culture station and teach people to run fish husbandry on new lines. To get the fishermen interested, he decided to begin by organizing a small laboratory, and one Sunday he went to see Mosolov, the kolkhoz chairman, to ask him for suitable premises.

Mosolov met Zubov on the porch and conducted him to an arbour draped in pale-green, budding vine leaves.

"Sit down, Comrade Inspector, sit down," Mosolov said genially, glancing expectantly at the visitor. "This is the first time you've come to see me, I believe."

"You never invited me, Kuzma Fedorovich."

"Never mind, sit down, you're welcome."

Mosolov's clean-shaven face and sturdy figure breathed an air of robust health, and the expression of his shrewd brown eyes gave one to understand that here was a man firmly convinced that everything he did and said was right and proper and useful.

"I've come to see you about a small matter, Kuzma Fedorovich," Vasili said. He drew his chair up closer. "I want to organize a fish-culture laboratory here, and in the autumn, if everything goes well, we can set up and equip a small hatchery. I'll talk it over with Antropov and have a chat with the fishermen, and we can rally the Komsomol."

"It's not a bad idea," Mosolov said, lifting his eyebrows, "the management will help you."

"Well then, I've come to see you about the premises and a little equipment."

Mosolov paused, tapping the toe of his polished boot on the floor, as though working out in his mind what this would cost. He swung his arm in the black sling round towards Vasili and said: "I'm afraid this will cost us a pretty penny, what do you think? A hatchery's no joke, my dear chap, it needs thinking over...."

"What d'you think it is—a rolling-mill or a motor-car plant?" Vasili said with a smile. "We won't need brick buildings or machines. All we need is a roomy place and water-pipes. Afterwards we can make pools for the young fish, install fish-breeding apparatuses, a refrigerator, and set stews in the river." He glanced hopefully at Mosolov's clouded face and added pleadingly: "I'm not asking for a hatchery now, just a laboratory where we could show people the methods of breeding fish."

Mosolov went up to Vasili and touched him lightly on the shoulder. "Must we have it just now?" he asked tersely.

"Have what?" Vasili said, uncomprehending.

"The laboratory."

"What do you mean? Don't we have to switch over to new methods of fish husbandry, Kuzma Fedorovich?"

Mosolov sat down again and adjusted his sling. "I've been wanting to have a talk with you for some time, Vasili Kirillovich," he began, weighing his every word. "It seems to me you're overdoing things."

"Overdoing things?" Vasili stared at him in astonishment. "What do you mean?"

"Now, don't fly off the handle. Hear me out first. The other day you confiscated the second team's fish catch. Now here's this hatchery scheme. I've got nothing against it, and we'll let you have the premises for it. But that's not the point."

"What is it, then?"

"My dear chap, on this job of ours we can't afford to play hopscotch and fool about like little kids."

"You call a hatchery fooling about?"

"Wait a minute," Mosolov brushed his interruption aside with a gesture of annoyance. "Don't twist my meaning. Every job has to be handled sensibly, it's no use biting off more than you can chew." He slapped Vasili's knee. "Now tell me this—what's the main job our kolhoz has to tackle at the moment? It's to give the country fish, isn't it? Well then, that's what we've got to proceed from. No one will hold us responsible for a hatchery, but we are responsible for the catch plan. 'Where's your fish?' we'll be asked. 'How have you fulfilled your obligations?' " His voice lost its edge and he went on dreamily: "There'll come a day, Vasili Kirillovich, when we'll build a hatchery and run things on new lines, but just now we've got to cut our coat according to our cloth and save our strength, otherwise we may live to rue it. And it's the same with overfishing on the fry." He offered Vasili a cigarette. "Have a smoke."

Mosolov's wife, a buxom woman in a pink dressing-gown, came out of the house carrying a bucket. She glanced at Vasili and greeted him politely.

"Finish the clearing up, Fanya, and get us up a snack or something," Mosolov shouted. He glanced at Vasili, who sat in moody silence, and smiled. "Don't be offended, Vasili Kirillovich. You and I are front-liners, and I don't wish you ill. Although you're an officer and I'm only a sergeant, I'm old enough to be your father, and I can teach you a thing or two in a friendly way, because——"

"No, wait a minute, Kuzma Fedorovich," Vasili broke in. "I'd like to get one or two things off my chest first, and then you can go ahead and teach me if you feel like it. Speaking about front-liners, you're likely to trample the name in the dirt with your present way of thinking. Yes! You talk about biting off more than we can chew. But don't you remember how our boys kept the fascists at bay, four or five of them against a whole platoon, and then went into the attack against the enemy's pill-boxes? Have you forgotten that, Kuzma Fedorovich?"

"I remember," Mosolov retorted gruffly. "But that was quite a different thing, my dear chap. That was war——"

"It isn't a different thing. What counted then, as now, is the human factor—the Soviet man. You make no allowance for that, you ignore it, and take my word, you'll find yourself a straggler in life's baggage-train before you know it."

Mosolov twitched his shoulder with an irritable gesture and was about to say something when his wife came out on the porch and cried: "Come in, I've laid the table!"

They went inside, and while the hostess served Vasili cold *kaimak*—the cream of scalded milk—and sun-dried fish, he went on arguing earnestly with Mosolov.

"The fisherman demands proof before he believes in anything. He won't swallow any blether; he wants to see the new methods of fish husbandry with his own eyes."

Mosolov looked at him, thinking with annoyance: "Riding the high horse, the hero! If he was in my shoes and had to answer for the plan, he'd sing a different tune!"

"Ah, well," he said glumly, "it seems we don't understand each other, Kirillovich. I've told you already, nobody's going to put any obstacles in the way of your laboratory. Take that little barn behind the vineyards and go ahead and organize your laboratory, by all means." He got up, took a turn about the room, and went on in a suppressed voice: "As for the fishery, we don't see eye to eye there. You've taken the bit between your teeth, my dear chap, you're trying to bite off more than you can chew, but I've got to keep a level head."

"What's a level head got to do with it?" Vasili said with a shrug.

"A mighty lot. In the first place discipline's got to be strengthened in the kolkhoz, the state plan's got to be fulfilled, and work properly organized, so's you can punch home with dead certainty. Get me?"

"Oh, let's drop it," Vasili said, rising. "This won't get us anywhere, I'm afraid. Better bring the question of the fishery's plan up before a Party meeting and get other people's advice before making a decision."

Mosolov, his face darkening with anger, pushed his chair back.

"All right, we can discuss it at a Party meeting," he said quietly. "Only it's a bit too early in the day to label me a straggler, Comrade Lieutenant."

After Vasili had gone, Mosolov paced up and down the room for a long time, staring down at the floor.

"The fellow hasn't been here a week and thinks he can teach me and lay down new paths for the kolkhoz," he brooded.

For all his resentment, he could not rid himself of the disturbing thought that he, ex-sergeant of the guards, a Communist and war hero, had made a blunder somewhere, had failed to grasp something important.

Zubov, on the other hand, while feeling sorry for Mosolov, was sure he had acted rightly in telling the chairman what he thought.

Not wishing to tear the old fishermen away from their work, Zubov went to see Tosya Belyavskaya to make arrangements for securing the help of the Komsomol.

Tosya, having lost her parents, had joined the army as a volunteer. She had served in a searchlight squad, was shell-shocked twice, and towards the end of the war was awarded the Order of the Red Star. After the war she came back to Golubovskaya, where she lived in her brother's house, worked in the village library, and was elected Secretary of the Komsomol organization. A sensible, sober young woman, she soon became a favourite with the stanitsa youth. Some of the best Stakhanovite fishermen had made her offers of marriage, but she politely turned down all her suitors, saying meditatively: "I don't think I want to be married yet." The other girls thought this queer of her, and gossiped about it, but then let the matter drop, deciding that everyone was free to arrange one's own life as one thought best.

Vasili met Tosya in the street on his way from Mosolov's. Wearing a white silk blouse with a blue kerchief thrown round her neck, she walked down the flooded street in rubber waders.

"Hullo, Comrade Corporal!" Vasili greeted her. "You're just the person I want."

"How d'you do, Comrade Lieutenant!" Tosya answered gravely.

Vasili told her about his plan for organizing a fish-culture laboratory and asked her to help fit out the barn which Mosolov had given him for the purpose. Tosya nodded and said: "Of course we'll help you, Vasya. I've had something like that in mind for a long time. Not exactly a laboratory, but something new, something big our young folks could really get enthusiastic about." She raised her blue eyes and said gravely: "Don't you see, Vasya, the boys and girls are fed up with this poky little hole."

"Here, wait a minute," Vasili said, pricking up his ears. "Since when has Golubovskaya become a poky little hole?"

"I don't mean it in that sense," Tosya said with a gesture of annoyance. "It's something entirely different. . . ."

"Well, what is it, then?"

"What I'm getting at is this—now, say someone from outside was to ask us: 'How are things going with you?' All we could answer is: 'So so. Nothing much. Neither good nor bad.' Life in the other kolkhozes is bubbling over, people there are forging ahead, but here it's neither hot nor cold. We manage to fulfil the plan and take care of the tackle—so on the face of it everything's in order. But people are not throwing their full weight into the job."

Vasili studied the girl closely. The Order on her white blouse glowed like a red poppy. Tosya toyed with her fair plait and said quietly: "This idea of yours is a very good one, if only we could see it through. It's going to be a hard job, Vasya. We'll have to persuade some people and fight others. But never mind. It's the start that counts. I'll get the girls together to-day, and to-morrow we'll get down to it. The girls will all go." She touched Vasili's hand and looked him straight in the eyes. "But mind your experiment succeeds, Vasya, other-

wise we'll look foolish. Don't be offended. The thing is to show people what it's all about, and not to have them lose faith in us."

"Don't you worry, Tosya, everything will be all right," Vasili said confidently. "We can't afford to bungle the job. We'll run the water up to the barn with an electric pump; Grunya will go up to town for the apparatuses, and whatever else we need we'll find here. We'll train our own young pisciculturists in a month or two and then raise the question of a hatchery."

Zubov saw Tosya home and arranged to see her at the meeting.

The meeting was held in the library, and on Monday a big team of Komsomol girls set to work putting the barn in order. The two damp bays were cleaned out, and the next day the girls carted up sand and clay, plastered the walls, and glazed the windows. Zubov, Prokhorov and Yasha, the motor-man, cemented the floor, installed a drain, and fitted out long tables for the fish-breeding apparatuses. Two pipes were run up from the river to the barn, and a little way off an electric pump belonging to the collective farm was installed in a wooden booth.

The old women of the village, upon learning that the new inspector intended to hatch young fish in the barn, wagged their heads and made sarcastic comments:

"He has nothing better to do. Just larking about!"

"Whoever heard of hatching fish like they were chickens! He'd do more good if he lent the fishermen a hand."

Avdei Talalayev, the ferryman, went out of his way to be more nasty than the others. Every day, on his way to the river, he would drop in at the barn, stand there for a few minutes stroking his skimpy beard, then ask spitefully: "So you're going to hatch fishes, eh, girls?"

And when the girls answered him he chortled: "Well,

well. . . . Good idea. First they kill off all the fish in the river and now they start restoring it? Will you breed enough to make some fish soup, eh?"

When meeting Zubov, the ferryman would bow politely, blink his weak eyes, and say: "This is something like the artificial insemination method, I suppose?"

"Yes, Grandpa, something like it," Vasilii answered.

"Well, well. That's interesting," the old fellow chuckled. "Mind you don't wed a pike-perch to a bream!"

He went away, glancing back at the busy girls and muttering something under his breath.

While waiting for the spate to run out, Avdei Talalayev made leisurely preparations for starting the ferry. As soon as the weather grew warm he moved back into his shack, which stood on a knoll in the woods at the water's edge. The shack was a solid affair built of sturdy poplar stakes and thatched with a thick layer of rye straw. It was roomy inside, with a little brick stove in the middle and wide plank-bunks.

Old Avdei kept all the ferryman's paraphernalia in this hut: lanterns with green and red glasses, measuring poles, carpenter's tools, ropes, lines, wire. All these things lay about conspicuously. But besides these the old man had fishing-tackle hidden away in the thick layer of mouldy straw—landing-nets, long-lines, and cast-nets.

Yegor had long since raised his father's boat he had scuttled at Zamanukha, and it now lay outside the hut, moored to a tree by a long chain. Yegor had been at pains to conceal his adventure at Zamanukha from his father, but the old man had got to know about it from Trifon, and one day, when Yegor brought his supper into the hut, old Avdei flew at him with loud abuse.

"You're a fool, Yegorka, a damn fool! Why the hell did you keep all the fish in the boat? You ought to know better than that! Shoot the net once or twice, then dump the fish out on the bank, and back again for another

haul—that's the way to do it. The boat should always be empty. If anyone nabs you, you just poke his blooming nose into the boat—there, have a look, nothing in it."

Yegor lay on the bunk, listening to his father and snapping back: "Oh, stop it, Dad! When Stepan Ivanovich was inspector I brought fish home every day without your advice. Try it yourself now, if you're so clever."

"You're a blockhead," Avdei wound up. "You wait till I start fishing—no one'll catch me."

"We'll see," Yegor said provokingly.

"You got to fish on the quiet, with sense," Avdei went on lecturing his son. "The thing is to go out on the river in two boats and drop anchors off opposite banks. In each boat there sits a harmless angler, fishing quietly with a rod and line, everything fair and square. And nobody will ever notice that between those boats a long-line with three hundred hooks has been set from bank to bank. You just sit with your rod, taking it easy, and keep your weather eye open. Soon as you see the coast is clear, you just drop the rod and pull the line home. Soon as you done that, dump the fish out on the bank, stow it in your baskets, and ta-ta...."

Yegor, lying on the bunk with a cigarette between his teeth, gave scant attention to what his father was saying. He was sick of this clandestine fishing. At the same time he understood that his father was right in not wanting to run any unnecessary risks.

"He's a sly old dog," Yegor said to himself. "Makes his pile, and no one can accuse him of poaching."

He was aware that the fishermen, at Zubov's request, had organized a public fishery inspection group. The general meeting had elected to this group Tosya Belyavskaya, Stepan Khudyakov, Grandpa Shrimp, Vitya, Marfa's son, Irina Grachova, the buoy-keeper's daughter, and Pimen Talalayev, the team-leader.

Avdei felt easier in his mind when he heard that his younger brother Pimen had been elected to the inspection group.

"I'll have a talk with Uncle Pimen as soon as the fishers get back from down the river," he told Yegor. "He can be a great help, you know. They'll be assigning inspectors to the different areas, and Pimen must try and wangle the lock area for himself—that's the finest spot for fish. The rest will be easy, Pimen and I will soon come to terms."

Five or six boats were always moored near the hut; the nets and long-lines were hidden in the straw inside the hut, while the oars were drying on the sloping roof. When Zubov, eyeing this flotilla suspiciously, once asked the ferryman what the boats were doing there, Avdei smiled good-naturedly and answered coolly:

"Every little boat needs looking after, Comrade Inspector. Seeing as I'm here day and night, I keep an eye on them, and the people they belong to show their gratitude one way or another—one man'll give a couple of pounds of potatoes, another will make a present of some dried pears, or treat an old man to some fish for his supper...."

"Do they catch a lot of fish?" Vasili inquired.

Avdei smiled and waved his hand deprecatingly. "Oh, they do their best. My roof's full of their rods and lines. See them? They dig up worms in the gardens, then sit about in their boats with fishing-rods. Some fellows will sit day and night and bring home a few lousy little fishes. That's about what it amounts to."

Zubov made a cursory inspection of the dark hut, which was cluttered with all kinds of junk, and went away reassured.

He arranged with Grunya that day for her to go up to town.

She left the same evening, taking with her a little

fibre suit-case in a canvas slip-cover. She hoped to get the five fish-breeding apparatuses which the kolkhoz management had ordered without delay and return immediately to the stanitsa. But things turned out differently.

The sullen woman whom Grunya applied to in the town office stunned her with the question: "Have you got an order?"

"What order?"

"A delivery order."

"I have a paper signed by the kolkhoz chairman."

The woman snapped open the lock of a brief-case much the worse for wear and busied herself with some papers.

"For one thing, we can't deliver anything without an order, for another, we haven't a single apparatus in good working condition."

"In that case I'll go and see the manager or complain to the newspaper," Grunya said. "What do you call this? People come here from a hundred miles away and you keep them hanging about the office. It's a disgrace."

The woman glanced at her coolly and said: "You can go and see the manager but he'll only tell you the same thing."

Fortunately the manager, a pink-faced man with a bald head as smooth and shiny as a billiard-ball, was not so flint-hearted and morose as his subordinate. Mopping his fleshy neck with a handkerchief, he heard Grunya out, then sighed and murmured sympathetically: "I'm sorry, my dear Comrade, but we really haven't any good apparatuses in stock just now. I really don't know how to help you." He folded his scented handkerchief neatly, put it away in his pocket, and looked out of the window. Suddenly he brightened up. "I tell you what. I'll give you a note to the Director of the Fisheries School! He'll let you have a pair of apparatuses, and we'll give him new

ones in a week or so. You can take a third one from us and repair it easily. We can't let you go away empty-handed."

He wrote a note and Grunya ran off to the college. She quickly found the squat building, which had been rebuilt after the war. "This is where Vasya studied," she thought. "I suppose they still remember him and will start asking me questions about him."

Grunya was not mistaken. The tall, grey-haired director read the note and immediately gave orders to the laboratory assistant to pack up two apparatuses; then he made Grunya sit down on the sofa and started speaking about Zubov.

"So you are from Golubovskaya?" he said. "That's fine. I know your stanitsa. One of our graduates should be working there—Zubov. He is? Well then, give him my regards. Fine chap. A bit hot-headed, but that will pass. Tell him he can rely on our assistance in this idea of yours. I'll send him some books in a day or two, some apparatuses, and new instructions. If he wants technical advice, let him write to us."

Anything that had to do with Zubov made pleasant hearing for Grunya, and she sat listening intently to the director's quiet voice.

"Zubov was a good student," he was saying. "I only hope he doesn't waste his talents on trifles down at your place. There's always a danger of letting yourself be carried away by some single aspect of the business and losing sight of the whole picture. Tell him to subscribe to magazines and do plenty of reading so as to keep abreast of things. Science doesn't tolerate stagnation and narrowness. Tell him that."

"I will," Grunya promised. "He's working hard as it is. He's gathered all the young people around him, and now we're opening a fish-culture laboratory at the kol-khoz and are planning to save the fish fry."

"That's it. Good. There is no end of work in fish husbandry so long as there's the will and the ability."

All three apparatuses were carefully packed in crates and sent down to the wharf. The steamboat *Molotov* lay at her moorings, but the embarkation had not started yet. In the crowd at the wharf Grunya noticed Stepan Khudyakov. Clad in a tarpaulin, Stepan was sitting on his rucksack by the iron railings. Catching sight of Grunya from afar he hailed her: "Are we travelling together?"

"Where are you going?" Grunya asked.

"To Golubovskaya. They sent me to town for salt."

"I'm going home, too."

They found places on the lower deck under the tightly stretched awning. The boat sailed at dusk. The clustering lights of the town twinkled on the left, and dense groves of pruned trees stretched in a purple line on the right.

"Won't you be cold?" Stepan asked.

"No, I have a quilted jacket, and besides, the nights are getting warmer."

She moved up closer to Stepan and he wrapped his pea-jacket about her with awkward solicitude.

"Now that'll be better."

Stepan Khudyakov had served on a Black Sea cruiser before the war and had tramped along the roads of war with a marine brigade. He had formed a lifelong attachment for his mates and took it badly when, after a serious chest wound, he was discharged from the navy. Back in the stanitsa he never parted with his cross-barred shirt, and on holidays he put on his black pea-jacket and sailor's cap with striped Guard's ribbons, and walked about the streets playing sailor songs on his accordion.

The boat no sooner left the dock and passed the flooded Green Island than Stepan glanced at Grunya and asked: "D'you mind if I play?"

"No, by all means, Stepan," Grunya said.

Stepan got his accordion out of its case, slipped the strap over his shoulder with an air of studied indifference, and ran his fingers idly over the gleaming ivory and mother-of-pearl keys. Humming to himself, he started to play the familiar old tune about the wide sea and the dying stoker. But someone had set new words to the old tune, about a heroic sailor who had defended his native sea against the enemy. Stepan sang the words softly, while he fingered the keys in a half-meditative way.

The passengers got up from their bundles and suitcases and moved closer to the singer in the dark, listening raptly to the sad, stirring song. Stepan sang about the death of the gallant sailor and about his brave mates who avenged the hero's death:

*Don't expect your boy home, Mother—
The accordions softly sigh....
The marines now fight ashore, Mother,
Night and day they fight and die.*

Huddled against the wall, Grunya sat listening to the song, and suddenly the whole picture rose vividly before her. She saw the wide blue sea, the rocky coast half-hidden in a pall of smoke, and the mortally wounded sailor, spitting sand and blood, pulling the pin of his last grenade with his teeth. Shutting her eyes, Grunya thought of this nameless man, of his dying thoughts, of the beautiful life he was defending on that hot stony land, scarred and rent by enemy bombs, smelling of smoke and burning, yet infinitely dear and precious. And while thinking this, Grunya felt with all her heart that her own life and work, like the life and work of Stepan, Vasili, Tosya—of all the people she knew—were a living part of this human dream for which the unknown hero had given up his life on a deserted shore.

"That's the kind of men we had, Grunya," Stepan said after a pause. "Proud, noble men. They taught me how to live."

A large moon was rising above the woods on the left bank. Gold-dimpled water rushed past the ship with a hiss. The passengers went slowly back to their places. From below, through a half-open hatch, came the hot breath of the pounding engines.

Grunya and Stepan sat chatting into the early hours of morning. Grunya told Stepan about the fish-culture laboratory, about the apparatuses, which stood next to her in plywood boxes, and about their plans for saving the young fish.

"Splendid!" Stepan said. "That's real good work, just what I like. Life is dull without it." He touched Grunya's hand and added in a conspiratorial tone: "I say, let's open the boxes and have a look at these apparatuses of yours! I'm dying to know how anyone can hatch live fishes out of spawn."

"Oh no, Stepan!" Grunya said, startled. "They're all packed in shavings and tied up. You'll see them in the stanitsa."

Grunya's father, Zubov, and Tosya with her friends met Grunya at the Golubovskaya landing-stage. The boxes containing the apparatuses were loaded on to a kolkhoz cart and taken to the clean, shining barn. On the way Vasili took Grunya's arm and asked: "What type are they?"

"I didn't notice, Vasya," Grunya said, abashed. "I didn't have time to look at them, they were packed up without me."

"All right. On Saturday we'll make the first setting. We'll start with carp."

Grunya clung fearfully to Vasili and whispered: "Will it work, Vasya?"

"Yes."

"One of the apparatuses is out of order."

"We'll put it right."

Vasili spent two days mounting the apparatuses on wooden racks. He worked from morning till night, excited and nervous. A crowd of girls watched the proceedings in awed silence. Stepan dropped in about five times a day. Mosolov looked in occasionally. He examined the apparatuses and had a talk with Zubov, adding: "If there's anything you need, send the girls round."

Grunya helped Vasili. She cut out leather washers, boiled pitch, and tested the thermometers.

By Friday evening the work was completed. The newly-installed apparatuses, gleaming with glass and metal, stood in their places in the crowded little barn. Two of them were glass vessels resembling overturned bottles mounted in a hollow iron stand fitted with a tap. The third, of a slightly different design, was made on the same principle: a continuous flow of water through the apparatus was calculated to keep the spawn deposited in the vessel in a state of constant circulation.

Vasili gave the apparatuses a last look over, then went to Mosolov and asked him to make a test catch at Talovaya the next morning.

"I want to select a hundred good breams and carps," he said. "We've got everything ready and are only waiting for the fish."

"All right," Mosolov nodded. "Pimen Talalayev has come up from down the river to-day. I'll ask him to cast a seine."

Vasili was uneasy: "I'm afraid this Pimen of yours will begin to kick. 'I've only just come back,' he'll say, 'and you're sending me out again.'"

Upon reading the chairman's note, however, Talalayev immediately consented to cast a seine at Talovaya. He merely asked the messenger: "What about the prohibi-

tion? This is close-time, you know. Say the inspector pops up?"

"This catch is for the inspector," the messenger explained. "He wants breams and carps for some reason or other."

"For the inspector?" Talalayev drawled in astonishment, then winked his eye gaily. "That's another matter!"

He slapped the messenger on the back. "How many breams does Comrade Zubov want?"

"A hundred at least, I heard say."

"Right-ho, tell the chairman we'll do this with pleasure for the inspector. We'll bring him the choicest breams. If he likes, we can smoke them for him, or dry them."

"I was told he needs live fish."

"Fresh fish, eh?" Pimen grinned. "Right you are, we don't mind."

At dawn the next day a scratch team of fishermen headed by Talalayev went out to the fishing-grounds and cast the seine. The haul proved to be a good one. The fishermen picked out of the seine fifty baskets of different kinds of fish.

Grunya, at Vasili's request, went out to Talovaya and selected a hundred of the biggest breams and carps which she carefully placed in a waterlogged boat.

"What are we to do with the rest?" Talalayev asked her.

"What do you mean? Send them down to the curing-shop, of course. We only need breams and carps."

"I see!" Talalayev nodded with a chuckle and passed his hand across his moustache. "All that fish going for experiments, eh?"

"Yes, Pimen Gavrilovich, for experiments."

"A whole hundred?" he queried sceptically.

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Just interested in science, that's all."

Zubov carefully examined all the fishes, sorted them out, and placed them in large baskets floating on the river.

The little barn housing the new fish-culture laboratory presented a scene of unusual animation. A crowd of old men huddled round the doorway, little boys scampered about under the windows, while inside, Tosya, Irina, and three of their Komsomol girl friends who had helped to tidy up the barn stood watching Vasili who was busy at the table.

"These are going to be our new pisciculturists," Grunya said to Mosolov.

The chairman stood smoking, watching Vasili at work.

Vasili, with his shirt-sleeves rolled up, was standing by the table sharpening a marrow blade on a whetstone. One of the girls, a salter in the curing-shop, had given him her white oilcloth apron to put on, and he said to Grunya with a smile: "I look like a grocer's assistant, don't I?"

On the long clean-scrubbed table stood jars with glass stoppers, small bottles with brightly-coloured labels, wads of cotton-wool, and glinting scissors and lancets.

"The devil knows whether it'll come off or not?" Vasili was thinking nervously. "People are interested in the thing. Look at the crowd—no room to swing a cat in. If I fail with the first setting, the whole thing will be ruined."

He did his best to keep calm; he smiled, joked, and shouted gaily at the children, but his nervousness was obvious. He fell into sudden silences, tapped his foot, smoked cigarette after cigarette, and meeting Grunya's troubled glance, shook himself as though driving off some disturbing, unwelcome thoughts.

"All right!" he flung crisply at the girls. "Let's begin."

Grunya and Tosya pulled out of the basket a large bream with reddish scales and laid it in a shallow groove cut out in the table. Vasili bent over it while the girls held it, and made a swift incision in the bream's spine near the head, exposing the brain. Then, with a spear-shaped curved lancet, he carefully extracted from the brain a greyish-white granule and dropped it into a glass jar.

"What's that for?" Irina asked.

"I'll tell you—just a minute..." Vasili muttered.

He repeated the operation on a second fish and explained to the girls what he was doing, glancing from one to the other.

"This is an important thing, girls. It enables us to control the period of fish propagation."

Holding the blood-stained lancet over his hand, he showed the girls crowding around the table a small granule at the tip of his lancet.

"This is the hypophysis, the pituitary body of the brain. We shall now make a preparation out of it and inject it into a spawning female fish. To-morrow she will give us mature spawn."

"Fancy that!" Mosolov exclaimed with approval, moving up closer. "That means we can fix our own calendar for the fish? Am I right?"

"Exactly," Zubov said. "What we're now doing is called pituitary injection. The discovery belongs to a Soviet scientist and is of tremendous importance in fish husbandry, since it allows man to control the complicated process of fish propagation."

When the necessary quantity of pituitary glands had been extracted, Zubov poured some colourless fluid out of a small bottle into the jar containing the bright, bead-like pituitaries.

"What's that?" asked Tosya.

Zubov showed her the label.

"Acetone. It's a solvent, removes fat and moisture from the pituitary. In fifteen minutes we'll pour off the first portion of acetone—it will have become turbid—and pour a fresh portion into the jar."

Hours passed, but no one left the barn. Adults and children watched what Vasili was doing with equal interest. The old women shook their heads and murmured: "This is too deep for me." "It takes a doctor from the hospital to understand these things, not a fisherman." "I wouldn't be so sure about a doctor either. He has to do with people, but these are fishes." "Our villagers will never get the hang of this."

"Don't you worry, Grandma," Vasili said, "everyone will get the hang of it in time. Might make a mistake here and there, but we'll get it all right in the end. Scientists will help us to get the hang of it."

"Yes—science will do the trick," Mosolov chimed in from the doorway.

Mosolov had no great faith in Zubov's idea, but he wanted this first experiment at spawn incubation in the kolkhoz to be a success. It was for this, and no other reason, that he went up to Vasili several times and boomed into his ear: "Go ahead, Vasili Kirillovich. If there's anything you need, we'll help you. Keep up the kolkhoz's reputation. . . ."

The pituitary glands, upon being removed from the acetone, were dry and hard like beads. Zubov laid them out in a round porcelain bowl and crushed them into a powder. Then he poured a solution over them out of a measuring-glass. He waited a while, then took a syringe out of a nickel-plated box, fitted the needle to it, and said to the girls: "Bring me the spawners from the second and third baskets. Don't put more than one fish in a bucket. Handle them carefully." He turned to Grunya. "Go with them, Grunya, and keep an eye on them."

The girls ran down to the river and presently returned

carrying net-covered buckets on yokes. Tosya took a big-bellied carp out of a bucket and laid it on the table. The fish twitched its amber-coloured fins and lashed its tail against the slippery board; and but for Mosolov, who caught hold of it, it would have dropped on the floor.

Zubov dipped the syringe into the jar and then examined it against the light.

"Exactly one and a half cubic centimetres," he muttered.

He stepped towards the table and cried out to Tosya: "Hold the fish!"

Feeling for a convenient spot along the spine, he confidently plunged the needle in sideways towards the head and slowly discharged the contents of the syringe.

"That's that. Put it in the bucket and take it back," he ordered. "Mind you put the injected spawners in separate baskets. Let's have the next one!"

When his work was done for the day, Vasili washed his hands thoroughly and said in a tired voice: "That's all for the present, Comrades. What we have just done will cause complete ripening of the spawn at the time we need it. To-morrow at noon we'll start the first setting."

The crowd of spectators broke up, commenting excitedly on what they had seen in the old barn behind the vineyards. Many intended coming back the next day to see the inspector charge the fish-hatching apparatuses with the spawn of the bream and carp.

"Well, Vasya? Will it go off all right?" Grunya asked anxiously when everyone had gone.

"It ought to," he answered a trifle uncertainly. "The trouble is these apparatuses you've brought are rather obsolete."

He glanced at the girl and laughed. She had fish-scales gleaming in her hair and on her forehead and neck.

"Don't worry, dear, everything will be all right," he said. "And now wash your face, look what a sight you are!"

They went home together.

Morning found the whole "pisciculture team," as someone had dubbed the girls, gathered in the barn. The old men, women, and children tailed along after them. Avdei Talalayev, the old ferryman, came too.

All the fish had been brought in from the floating baskets and placed in a tub filled with river water.

Zubov slowly rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, moved a clean enamelled basin to the edge of the table, and said to Grunya, who stood waiting in silence: "Come on, Grunya!"

Grunya lifted a heavy spawning carp out of the tub and handed it to Vasili. The fish, its scales gleaming with a yellowish lustre, gulped the air nervously and rolled its slippery body sluggishly from side to side.

Pressing its head down and holding its twitching tail, Vasili bent over the basin and carefully squeezed the carp's belly with his fingers, moving his hand slowly down towards the tail hanging over the basin without releasing the pressure.

The spawn squirted into the white basin.

"That's a good spawner," Vasili muttered. "Let's have the next one."

He squeezed the eggs from the second fish, then from a third. The people stood watching him in utter silence. Only Avdei Talalayev, peeping into the basin with the fish-eggs, attempted a humorous remark.

"All you need now's a bit of onion, a little salad-oil, and a glass of vodka to go down with it."

The ferryman's joke fell flat.

Having done with the spawners, Vasili said tersely: "Let's have the milters, Grunya!"

He pressed the milt out of the male carps into the same basin with the eggs, poured in a little turbid water

to free the eggs from stickiness, and began stirring them with a tuft of goose feathers.

"European and American pisciculturists used to add a lot of water when mixing the spawn with the milt," Zubov said musingly. "Vladimir Pavlovich Vrassky, a Russian scientist, invented the dry method, which proved to be much more effective. We're now working on a semi-dry method. Experiments like this were made at my college."

Avdei cocked his eye knowingly and looked round as though seeking support. "The inspector's trying to pull our leg. Fish breeds in the water, and you want to lay down your own laws for it. All God's creatures have their lots mapped out for them since the world was made, and you want to change it about your own way!"

Vasili wiped his hands on a towel and answered calmly: "Clever people say that not everything in Nature is well arranged. Some things need putting to rights, Grandpa. And that's what we're trying to do."

"Ah, well," the old man meekly acquiesced. "Maybe with God's help our little calf will swallow the wolf!"

"We'll see," laughed Vasili. "Maybe it will!"

He said this without quite feeling sure of himself. The first experiment might prove to be a failure. There was nothing to do but wait.

Grunya now stayed on duty in the old barn from morning till late in the night. The eggs in the apparatuses soon hatched into larvae. They swarmed in the vessels, thin and transparent as glass, with clumsy yolk-sacs, bearing no resemblance to fishes. Grunya feasted her eyes on them for hours, murmuring: "My teeny-weeny darlings. . . . Soon we'll let you out in the river and you'll swim away to the deep blue sea."

All day long the doors of the barn stood wide open.

People came in crowds to look at the apparatuses, not only fishermen, but collective farmers from the neighbouring grain-growing kolkhozes. Watching the light motion of larvae, they looked at each other and said sedately:

"Looks sensible enough! It might pay if it was properly organized."

"I should say so. Breeding fishes like chicks. You could keep stock of them all!"

The steppe collective farmers studied the larvae with particular interest. While waiting for the ferry to take them across the river, they would drop in at the barn, chat with Vasili and Grunya, and say to one another:

"This is a big thing for us, too. Our lands are far away from the river. We're digging ponds now. It would be fine if you could raise some fish for our ponds!"

"We'll rear fish for your ponds, too," Grunya said cheerfully.

One morning, however, upon coming into the barn, she was horrified to see that the water circulating in the apparatuses was slowly revolving a mass of dead larvae.

She rushed to call Vasili, and they both came running into the barn. Vasili stared at the apparatuses.

"I can't make it out. We did everything right," he said in dismay.

He paced about the barn, then suddenly stopped, struck by an idea. "We must have been a little late in transferring the larvae from the apparatuses to the boxes. After hatching, the larvae of the cyprinidae must pass through a phase of repose. And in the apparatuses the water circulates without a stop."

He touched the shoulder of the distressed girl and said softly: "Never mind. Let's pick out the live larvae before it's too late and put them in boxes in the river. We'll go on with the experiment nevertheless. Shan't we, darling?"

"Yes, Vasya," Grunya answered with a sigh.

The water drained slowly off the flood meadows as though yielding reluctantly to the persistence of the sun and wind, which dried the warm earth. The highest points—little knolls, hillocks, and ancient Tatar burial-mounds scattered over all the Don steppe—began to crop out, forming little islands. Weeks passed, and the ebbing water flowed back into the river together with the fishes which had spawned. A multitude of small fry were drawn into the river in the wake of the older fishes. But a mass of young fish was left stranded in the lakes and inlets.

Day and night the water receded imperceptibly, and soon the last strip of riverside land, emerging from under the water, would throw up a barrier between the river and the high-water pools gleaming in the hollows of the flood meadow.

Masses of young fish were yearly stranded in these depressions—baby breams, carps, and pike-perches. The shallower the water grew in these isolated pools the more fish fry perished in them. The voracious marsh birds pecked them and the pigs grazing on the meadows devoured them. When the summer sun consumed the last moisture in the pools, the fate of the immature fishes was sealed. They lay strewn about the drying ground like masses of fallen leaves, convulsively gulping the dry, scorching air, twitching their tiny gills coated with steppe dust, and staring up into the sky with fast dimming eyes. The baby fishes died by the million, died a senseless death by the blind edict of unreasoning Nature.

Zubov spent a long time over the plan for saving the young fish. He provided for every detail and often went to consult Grunya, who was sewing hoop-nets with her friends and checking containers in the fishery stores for transporting the fry. She complained to Vasili, almost on the verge of tears: "Those storekeepers are rotters. We

had prepared clean barrels for the spring, and they've gone and filled them with all kinds of muck—kerosene, pitch, and vitriol. How can I use such barrels for transporting the fish? They'll all die. . . . They dirtied the barrels, used up all the gauze, and didn't prepare any spades. How do they expect me to work?"

"Never mind, darling, we'll do something about it," Vasili reassured her. "I'll go and see the chairman. They have some new barrels put away for the wine—we can use those. We can send someone up to town for some more gauze. As for the spades, we can have the old ones mended—I'll see the smiths about it myself."

During the height of the preparations for rescuing the fish fry, Vasili learned that the Golubovskaya fishermen were returning from downstream and that a scientific expedition was coming out to work near the dam.

"What expedition?" Vasili asked.

Mosolov shrugged his shoulders with a worried look. "To study the beluga."

"The beluga?" Vasili cried, overjoyed. "Who's in charge of the expedition, didn't you hear? Is it Professor Shchetinin?"

"That's the one—Professor Shchetinin," Mosolov said. "That's what the telegram says. We got it direct from the Ministry. They'll be here to-morrow."

Zubov came away with a fast-beating heart and went straight to the Prokhorovs to tell Grunya the good news.

Vasili had known Professor Ilya Afanasievich Shchetinin for a long time. Before the war, when Vasili was a youngster matriculating for the Fisheries School, the students of the senior courses had given him a friendly warning to keep away from the examining board if Professor Shchetinin happened to be in the room. "He's sure to pluck you," they said. As luck would have it, just when Zubov had taken his seat facing a young woman examiner and had begun to answer her questions, an

old man in horn-rimmed glasses, tall and thin as a rake, entered the room. It was Professor Shchetinin. He listened to Vasili's answers with a frowning face, interrupted him brusquely several times, but said nothing. Vasili nevertheless passed the examination with an excellent mark.

Later, as a student, Vasili contrived several times to sneak into the auditorium of the senior courses to listen to Shchetinin's lectures on ichthyology and pisciculture. The lectures of this tall, grim old man delighted Vasili. Professor Shchetinin lectured as no one else could. His knowledge of fish was amazing, and he could talk endlessly about aquatic life. At the same time he never hesitated to admit, and sometimes indeed sharply emphasized, his ignorance of certain scientific problems. "I don't know this," he would tell the students, "and can't tell you anything about it. We'll have to study it together." This unflinching honesty appealed to Zubov, as it did to all the other students. It was much more attractive than the smooth lectures of smug know-alls.

After the war, when Vasili, demobilized from the army, entered the second course at college, he met Professor Shchetinin again. The man had aged noticeably. Although many piscatologists did not like the old man for his irascible and restless moods—some, behind his back, called him a "boor" and even a "squabbler"—there was something about him that strongly attracted Vasili. Perhaps it was this very outspokenness and bluntness of his, which went against the grain of his colleagues, or it may have been a poetic worship of Nature hidden away in the depths of his shy soul.

During the three years he spent at the school Vasili grew ever more strongly attached to his teacher. He dogged his footsteps and was prepared to stay awake all hours listening to the old man talking about the different seas and rivers and the countless lakes of Russia he had

seen during his piscatorial researches, about the ways and habits of fishes, and, above all, about the future of fish husbandry. The latter was Shchetinin's hobby-horse. He was full of plans for organizing new forms of pisciculture, wrote memorandums, reports, and telegrams without end to the various trusts, corporations, head offices, and ministerial departments, then suddenly he would disappear for a prolonged period, roaming about the rivers or camping for months on the shore of a lake, studying some unknown variety of the carp family.

When he heard that Shchetinin was heading a beluga expedition and was expected at Golubovskaya any day, Vasili ran down to Grunya in the barn.

"Shchetinin is coming down here," he shouted from the doorway.

"What Shchetinin?" Grunya said, startled.

"Don't you remember me telling you about him? My teacher! You'll see what a wonderful man he is, darling," Vasili said. "After a day with him you feel you've grown a head taller. He makes you feel as if you're sprouting wings."

Grunya glanced apprehensively at her girl friends and the bits of cheese-cloth littering the room. She touched Vasili's sleeve fearfully. "Oh, Vasya, I'm scared to death!"

"Why?"

"How will I manage this fry rescue work with him about? He might go for us all bald-headed. You told me yourself he goes for everybody."

"Don't make up stories," Vasili laughed. "I never told you anything of the sort. You have to get used to him, though."

Vasili met Mosolov in the evening and the latter told him that Shchetinin was coming down to Golubovskaya on the launch *Bream*, belonging to the expedition, and that the launch was expected to arrive the next morning.

"Our fishing-boats are coming in his wake," Mosolov said. "They should be here to-morrow evening, too."

"What about the fishing plan?" Vasili asked, somewhat puzzled by the chairman's cheerful air. In speaking about the fishermen coming back he looked pleased and snapped his fingers.

"The plan will be fulfilled here."

"What do you mean? Fishing is prohibited just now," Vasili said.

Mosolov's face spread in a smile.

"Shchetinin will need both our seine teams for catching the beluga. The rest of the fish caught in the nets is to go to the curing-shop in fulfilment of our plan. We have the Ministry's permission."

"That means Shchetinin will be pleased and the kolhoz will gain by it?"

"That's just it," Mosolov nodded. "Now we'll be able to use Grandpa Shrimp's net team for rescuing the fish fry. Our pisciculturist has been crying her eyes out these last three days."

Vasili went straight to bed on coming home, so as to get up early and go down to meet the *Bream*. He awoke at daybreak, washed himself quickly, and went out without waking Vitya.

Every river looks its best in the morning, and Vasili, ever since he had been a child, was fond of taking an early morning stroll. He sat down on a beached wherry and began to smoke. The sun had not yet risen, but the glow of dawn beyond the woods already painted the tops of the riverside willows and poplars a dazzling vermilion. Cooled over night, the placid waters of the river were a smooth blue sheet, and faint wreaths of mist drifted here and there over the surface. Awakening birds twittered in the dim shadows of the woods.

The *Bream* hove in sight at a little after seven. She was towing three wide river boats that sat deep in the

water, and Vasili heard the throbbing of her Diesel engine long before he saw the launch herself. To Vasili's surprise, however, Professor Shchetinin was not on board the launch.

"Where is Ilya Afanasievich?" he asked the steersman, a ruddy-faced lad in a tarpaulin jacket.

"He's coming up with the fishing-boats," the latter answered with a yawn. "We caught up with them off the Melekhov sand-banks, and Ilya Afanasievich got in with the fishermen."

"What for?"

"Ask me another one. 'Don't wait for me,' he says. 'Go along, and I'll get to Golubovskaya with the fishermen.'"

Vasili laughed. How like Shchetinin that was! Vasili recognized the old traits of character which many of those who disliked him called "whims," "crotchets," and "kinks."

That day, while waiting for the fishing-boats to arrive, Vasili helped Grunya to prepare the containers for the fish fry. They spent about four hours in the kolkhoz stores, seeing to it that the new barrels were properly washed, checking the large rubber tubs, and explaining to the carpenter how to make the check-traps.

Late in the afternoon Vasili and Grunya, together with the whole stanitsa, went down to the bank.

A long string of fishing-boats appeared from round the bend in the river, bathed in the glow of the setting sun. Dozens of oars rose and fell in unison over the dark hulls. The men and women in the boats were singing the song of Stepan Razin, and its dying echoes drifted over the woods and meadows.

"They sing well!" Grunya said wistfully.

The boats came alongside the jetty in a compact caravan. Broad gangways flew over the sides with a clatter, and the fishermen stepped ashore one by one.

"There is Shchetinin," Vasili whispered to Grunya.

Supported by Antropov, a tall upright old man came down the gangway with a thump of heavy boots. He had a wrinkled face with a fleshy nose on which there firmly sat a pair of glasses with thick gleaming lenses. The old man wore rough tweeds of a sandy colour and a regulation cap with a round emblem. Drops of water glistened on the professor's rumpled trousers and jacket.

Vasili strode up to the gangway and cried joyfully: "Good evening, Ilya Afanasievich!"

A warm sparkle lit up the old man's frosty eyes. He held out his big hand to Vasili and said in a harsh, grating voice: "Hullo, Zubov. So this is where you have fixed up! That's good. Your f-first name is Vasili, I b-believe? And your p-patronymic?"

"Vasili Kirillovich."

"Why, yes. I remember now."

Shchetinin spoke with difficulty, as though he had a pebble in his mouth. The professor had a habit of stuttering very badly when irritated or angry, and sometimes on such occasions he would suddenly lapse into silence, staring fixedly at his interlocutor with prominent snapping eyes, then recovering from the nervous spasm, resume his speech.

"How are you getting on?" Shchetinin asked, leaning on Vasili's arm. "Do they steal much fish here?"

"Not very much, Ilya Afanasievich."

Making way for Grunya, who was walking at his side, Vasili introduced her to the professor: "This is the pisciculturist of the Golubovskaya fishery."

Shchetinin glanced at the girl and nodded. "Glad to meet you. Finished courses, I take it?"

"I graduated the one-year course," Grunya said, blushing. "Last year...."

They walked towards the stanitsa, surrounded by a boisterous crowd of fishermen. Loaded up with bags and

fish baskets, the fishermen went along at a rolling gait, fondling the youngsters who dodged in and out of the crowd, and gazing at the stanitsa streets, still partly flooded, with dark caps of luxuriant spring foliage rising overhead. Vasili paused to greet Marfa and take her basket from her, exchanged a few words with Antropov, and hastened to overtake Shchetinin.

As the professor found walking difficult a room was given him on the bank of the river in Grandpa Shrimp's house. In the evening, after the professor had rested, Vasili went to see him. He found Ilya Afanasievich on the porch, sitting beside the mountainous figure of Grandpa Shrimp, adroitly rolling himself a cigarette, and talking about the beluga.

"It's a very interesting fish, old man, a purely Russian fish. It occurs only in Russian waters. As yet we know very little about the beluga, but volumes could be written about it. So we have to study its mode of life and habits in the sea and the river, and the conditions of its propagation."

"What made you pick on Golubovskaya, Ilya Afanasievich?" Vasili asked, seating himself on the porch steps.

Shchetinin blew out thick wreaths of smoke and coughed.

"The Golubovskaya dam worries me. As you know, the beluga shoals go to spawn after the dam girders have been set up and the river cut off. The beluga's chief breeding-homes are located much farther upstream than your stanitsa. Consequently, the dam is an obstruction during the spawning-run. Huge belugas jostle round the lock, smashing their noses against the sharp edges of the girders and trying in vain to force a passage."

The professor shook the fag-end out of his holder and went on musingly: "Not finding their breeding-homes, the belugas are unable to spawn. The eggs degenerate and the female is left barren. Many points still need

clearing up, but one thing is clear to me—man must come to the fish's aid. And that's why I'm here—I want to try out one such aid method."

"What method is that?" Zubov asked.

"We'll catch beluga spawners and milsters and try to transplant them across the dam, so that they could reach their spawning-grounds. No doubt it will be a difficult job, as we have no experience to go on."

They were silent for a while. Grandpa Shrimp gazed at the red and white lights of the buoys twinkling in the distance, scratched his hairy chest, and yawned.

"The old folks say a beluga stone will cure any ailment. I heard say it works wonders against the evil eye and all kinds of harmful spells, sores, and what not. They find it in the beluga's kidneys; about the size of a hen's egg it is. When you first take it into your hand it's soft, but then it gets harder, something like a corn. The surgeon's got a stone like that in its innards, too, only it doesn't work half as good...."

The dog next door barked lazily. An oriole in the vineyards gave a sleepy cry.

"And did you ever cure anyone with a beluga stone, Yerofei Kuprianovich?" Shchetinin chuckled.

"Well, I can't exactly say as I've cured anyone myself," Shrimp confessed, "but my grandfather now—may his soul rest in peace—he put old Talalayeva on her feet again with that same stone. She was a healthy woman and they were very comfortably off, but all of a sudden she lost the use of her legs. Laid up for three years, she was. They took her to see doctors and had all kinds of hags in to work witchcraft on her, but it didn't help. Then Grandfather cured her with a beluga stone. He started the cure in the spring, and by the summer she was on her feet again. After that he sold the stone to some official chap at the mines for ten rubles—the fellow wanted to cure himself of the booze."

"Hear that, Zubov?" Shchetinin said, repressing a smile. "I have heard, though, that beluga liver does contain a substance that cures people of such a serious complaint as leukemia."

He began to question Vasili about the work for rescuing the fish fry. Vasili told him what was being done and complained about the fishery management who still looked on this work as a minor job and was not giving it sufficient attention.

To Vasili's surprise Shchetinin gave him no sympathy.

"It's your own fault," he said irritably. "A district fishery inspector, young man, is not just a m-militiaman whose duty it is to write up charge-sheets. You've been here s-some months—sufficient time to make every fisherman realize what the preservation of thirty or forty million fish fry means to the state."

"We discussed it at the board meeting," Zubov tried to remonstrate.

"You d-discussed it b-badly then. I'll go and see the management myself to-morrow."

Shchetinin pulled himself up with a grunt, sighed, and gave Vasili his hand, saying apologetically: "I'm tired. My years are telling. Need a rest. Good night."

The old man rolled a cigarette and shuffled up and down outside the porch. He glanced at the moon, veiled in misty clouds, listened to the soft splash of the water on the river, and thought of belugas, of fish fry—of what he had devoted his long life to and what gave meaning to it

6

One hot summer's day the whole fishing kolkhoz of Golubovskaya went out into the flood meadows. At a meeting of the kolkhoz board Professor Shchetinin had

declared that all the fishing teams should be immediately employed in rescuing the young fish.

Taking the fishery's run-about, Shchetinin, accompanied by Antropov and Zubov, had made a round of the right-bank flood meadow on which there were dozens of rushy lakes, old creeks, and black bogs. He sketched a plan of the flood meadow reservoirs, made a test catch himself in the outlying lakes, and counted the young fish by species.

"There are vast multitudes of fish fry in the flood meadows," he told the fishermen. "They have to be rescued."

On Sunday, Antropov's, Talalayev's, and Grandpa Shrimp's teams, Grunya Prokhorova's special team, and a large party of school children, rode out to the meadow. Mosolov had been for exempting the office and other staff, but Shchetinin, losing his temper, had given the chairman a piece of his mind, after which the latter gave orders for all the book-keepers, clerks, weighers, messengers, and care-takers to go out into the field.

People scattered over the whole flood meadow. Over a hundred men began to dig a channel from the huge Kuzhnoye Lake to the river. Grandpa Shrimp's women's team drag-netted the outlying lakes: Big Swan Lake, Petrovskoye, Silt Lake, and Pearl Lake.

The flood meadow was already green with young grass. A fine dust rose over the dried roads from under the wheels of the bullock-carts, and only here and there gleamed a few remaining pools and puddles.

Grunya Prokhorova had the hardest time of all. Saddling the fishery's chestnut stallion, she dashed from lake to lake; her blue sports blouse could be seen flitting about all over the meadow.

What worried her most was Shrimp's net team. The fish fry here was transferred to the river by a difficult and painful process. They drag-netted the pools and scooped

out the fry with gauze nets. Then the water-barrels were taken five miles in ox-carts and emptied into the river.

Spotting Grunya on the road, Shchetinin hailed her, and when she cantered up on her sweating horse, he drawled in his grating voice: "Your netters are no damn good, my girl. They're overloading the barrels with the less hardy species—pike-perch, for instance. Don't let them put in more than a hundred fry to a pail of water, otherwise they'll kill the fish on the way and dump corpses in the river."

"I'll see to it at once," Grunya said nervously.

Shchetinin made a wry face. "Wait a minute. I haven't finished yet. The water in the barrels is too warm. That means less oxygen. What must you do in such a case?"

Grunya held in her prancing horse and answered: "I'll tell them not to pack in the fry too tight and ask the chairman to have some ice brought down from the curing-shop. I'll be off!"

She whipped her horse and galloped off to Swan Lake. She dashed straight into the water, giving old Shrimp a shower bath. Wiping her perspiring forehead, she pounced on the indignant old man. "What d'you mean by overloading the barrels with pike-perches? Don't you know it's a delicate little fish? I got it hot through you. And go easier with the hoop-nets—you're putting dazed fishes into the barrels."

"Phew, drat the girl!" Grandpa Shrimp growled, backing away into the water. "Dashing about like mad! We know what we have to do without you telling us. Delicate little fish—pshaw! They're tough little brats!"

"What d'you mean by that!" Grunya waxed indignant. "How would you like to be stuck in a barrel and trundled off five miles by oxen?"

Shrimp waved his hand conciliatingly. "Oh, all right. Lay off, lassie. We'll book sleeping-car tickets for your pike-perches, the rest can travel third class."

Grunya watched the women haul the drag-net ashore and scoop out the fish fry, and pleaded with them: "Oh, do be careful, please! These baby fishes are so tender, they're like weak little chicks. If you squeeze them ever so little or handle them roughly, they're done for."

Marfa Sazonova went up to Grunya. Pulling down her skirt, which was tucked high, she said: "Have you seen Vasili Kirillovich, Grunya? I've brought his lunch with me. He left the house at peep of dawn and hasn't eaten anything since."

"No, I haven't seen him, Marfa Panteleyevna," Grunya said, her face clouding. "I'm not his keeper."

Marfa smiled. "If you see him, will you please tell him I'm at Swan Lake. Let him run down for a bite. We can't have him starving." She looked round and added: "Or he won't last till his wedding day."

Grunya watered her horse and decided to wait until the women had transferred the fish fry to the barrel, so as to accompany the cart down to the river and keep an eye on the condition of the fish. Soon the hundred-bucket barrel with fresh river water was filled with spry little fishes and covered with a hemp sack. The tall piebald bullocks, with creaking yokes, hauled the cart over the bumpy road. The water splashed through the thin sack-
ing.

Grunya, riding behind the cart, saw this and shouted: "Get off on to the grass! You'll kill all the fry over those bumps!"

The face of Irina Grachova, wearing a white kerchief on her head, peeped out from behind the barrel.

"It's a hayfield," she said. "If we trample the grass the farmers will bite our heads off."

Grandpa Shrimp interjected: "That's all right, turn off on to the grass! Nothing'll happen to it. It's young grass, it'll straighten up before the haymaking!"

The girl turned the oxen on to the grass, and they went straight across the green field, swinging their tails. Grunya, gripping her dancing mount by its skimpy mane, made vain efforts to jump into the saddle. Her rubber-soled sports shoes, wet from the grass, slipped in the high-strung stirrups, and the sleek stallion, curvetting on his slender white-stockinged legs, bared his teeth and tried to nip Grunya's shoe.

Marfa winked to her father-in-law who stood by, chuckling, and said: "Why don't you give the pisciculturist a hand, Dad? You're the only gentleman around."

Grandpa Shrimp went up to Grunya, placed his huge palm under her foot, and growled: "Up you go, you skirted Cossack!"

Grunya dashed off after the ox-cart without looking back. She was particularly annoyed at Marfa having witnessed her helplessness. She was sure to tell Vasili how the beastly horse had led the "pisciculturist" a dance.

Grunya asked Irina to stop the oxen several times during the journey. She would get off the horse, untie the sack, and peep into the barrel. The tiny inch-long breams and carps felt perfectly at home there. They darted about in all directions, butted the sides of the barrel, and sheered away in fright; but the little pike-perches were obviously doing poorly. They were sluggish and apathetic.

Grunya hitched the horse to the cart, got in beside Irina, and said imploringly: "Let's go faster, darling! The water's getting warm, and the fish can't breathe properly."

"Gee-up!" Irina yelled, brandishing a long switch.

The oxen quickened their pace. The girls sat in silence, their bare legs dangling over the side of the cart. They rode past Pimen Talalayev's team of fishermen, who were digging a connecting ditch, saw Professor Shchetinin standing on a field-balk talking with the collective-farm chairman, and turned off to the right towards

the old river-bed with the bluish-green willows standing over it. Long ago the river had abandoned this bed which had now become an arm of the river, skirting a wooded island. The villagers called this arm Nizenki, or Lower Arm.

"Drive straight to Nizenki, Irina," Grunya said worriedly. "It'll be quicker."

Irina, shouting at the lazy oxen, drove them down the sloping bank and into the water up to their bellies. The girls untied the barrel and carefully began to bail out the fish fry and empty them into the river by gently tipping the buckets. The baby fishes stood motionless in the water for a second, then vanished with a flick of their transparent tails.

Grunya, watching the rescued fish, forgot everything else on earth. She stood on the slippery board of the cart, her bare feet planted wide and her lips parted, watching the silver rain of young fishes dropping into the river where they melted like twinkling sparks in the greenish water.

"Isn't it wonderful, Irina!" she cried with delight. "Look how many we've saved and how many fine carps, breams, and pike-perches will grow out of them! Let them swim about now and remember us!"

The girls parted company at the Nizenki. Irina rode back to Swan Lake for the next lot, and Grunya, getting into the saddle, galloped off to see how the work was going on in Talalayev's team, which was digging a channel between Kuzhnoye Lake and the river. According to Grunya, Talalayev should have finished the job by eleven o'clock in the morning. However, when she rode up to the spot where a white tent was pitched in the meadow, she was surprised to see the fishermen sitting around it. The men had stuck their spades into the ground and were having their lunch.

"What's the idea taking a rest so early, Comrades?"

Grunya said without getting down from her horse. "The other teams are all hard at work. Every minute is precious!"

Pimen Talalayev, who was munching a fat sun-dried fish over a lunch-bag wedged between his knees, raised a greasy hand and bellowed: "Come and join us, lass. My boys felt hungry, so we decided to have a bite."

Grunya dismounted, went up closer, and said in a pained tone: "But, Pimen Gavrilovich, you'll hold up the draining of the lake. The others will dig their quota and go away. The fish fry can't wait. How could you...?"

"Sit down to table, Grunya, and don't worry—nothing'll happen to your fish fry," the team-leader said with a genial chuckle.

He wiped his hands on his trousers, rolled a *makhorka* cigarette, lit up, and stretched himself on the grass. Glancing slyly from the fishermen to the distressed girl, he continued:

"Heigh-ho! This is a funny world. Look you, Grunya, we've lived all our lives on this river, our fathers and grandfathers before us, and no one ever rescued fish fry, yet we always had plenty of fish. Nowadays we're rescuing fry and doing all kinds of clever things, and yet there's less and less fish in the river every year. Strikes me this rescue work of yours is like pouring water into a sieve, for all the good it'll do."

"Why?" Grunya demanded, indignant. "We'll get over ten thousand full-grown fishes out of every million fry. Our scientists have proved that, Pimen Gavrilovich. Hundreds of thousands of fry will perish in the river, will be eaten up by the big fish, and all the rest of it, but don't forget, we'll still get ten thousand full-grown fishes! Can't you see what a benefit this will be to people!"

"Benefit your grandmother!" Talalayev said, getting up and reaching for his spade. "Just a lot of words. The

river is getting exhausted, that's all. This fish fry of yours will do about as much good as a poultice to a dead man."

Stepan Khudyakov cleaned his spade and grumbled: "That'll do, Uncle Pimen! You're always spouting your theories, but they never make sense. Talking about your grandfathers. A fat lot they caught. Have a look at the fish cannery, you'll see how much we catch nowadays. I've been in town and seen it. The fish pump there is working without a stop and the fishes run along it like it was a conveyor. At this rate the river will be exhausted quicker, of course. All the more reason why we've got to replenish the stocks."

"That's one on the knob for you, Uncle Pimen!" the fishermen guffawed.

The men put their lunch-bags away under the tent and fell to work. Grunya, leading her horse by the bridle, started off down the road towards Kuzhnoye Lake. Talalayev's sneers and the expression of his bloated red face made the girl furious. She walked along, angrily tugging the horse which kept nibbling the grass. "There's tons of work to be done here," she thought, "and it's going to be hard work, too. Especially with men like Talalayev around. He'll go on like this for the rest of life, making trouble for people, and yet they'll swear by him because, you see, he fulfils the plan. Our chairman's got nothing but plan fulfilment on the brain, yet he doesn't realize that you've got to breed the fish for that same plan."

Her thoughts turned to Vasili and Marfa. She recollected Marfa's request to send Vasili down to Swan Lake, and smiled. "Catch me hunting about for him now!"

Twirling her whip, Grunya rode down to the lower bank of Kuzhnoye Lake where Antropov's team was finishing its task and making ready to drain the water out through the newly-dug channel. Talalayev's men were holding up the operation, but while Grunya was talking to Antropov, Mosolov returned from his round

and reported that the channel had been finished along its whole length.

At that moment Professor Shchetinin rode up in the run-about. He glanced at the dark line of the channel running across the flood meadow, then at the green thickets of the lake rushes, and growled: "Mow a swath through the rushes at once—they'll block the way. The water will run off and leave the fish fry stranded on the other side."

The people, who had just laid down their spades, set to work with scythes. Antropov, knee-deep in the water, cut the thick rushes to the very roots, and the school children, carrying armfuls of mown rushes to the silty bank, could barely keep up with him. In less than a quarter of an hour a lane of water had been cleared through the green thickets.

"Well, good luck!" Antropov said, panting.

He took a spade and dug away the last few feet of earth separating the lake from the channel. A crowd of wet, muddy people huddled round the wide neck of land through which the water rushed, bearing hundreds of thousands of nimble little fishes along with it towards the river.

At the sight of the merry commotion among the little fishes tumbling down the channel, the tired people brightened up. Together with the children, they squatted on their heels, and tried to catch the young fishes with outspread fingers. "What a lot there are!" they marvelled. "How are we going to count them all? You can't take stock of such a mass!"

"We'll count them all right," Grunya chuckled. "We'll set check-traps in the ditch and take test samples."

It was here that Vitya Sazonov, to the great envy of his pals, showed himself at his most brilliant. Vitya, who was one of Grunya's chief assistants, dived under a cart and produced a hand-made trap over which he had toiled

for nearly a month. This check-trap, designed and constructed by Vitya, represented a square frame made of flat iron rods taken out of an old bedstead belonging to his mother. To this frame a fine, bag-like net was attached by special clamps. On the top slat of the frame the Golubovskaya inventor had fixed a wooden stand for a sand-glass. All this conformed to the instructions of the Fisheries Trust, which contained a description of a check-trap. All, that is, except for one detail, which was Vitya's own idea.

While working in Grunya's team, Vitya had noticed that the approved model did not insure against inaccuracies. On being set in the ditch it was supposed to act as a sort of catch-strainer with a strictly defined time limit of ten minutes by the clock. By counting the number of fish fry caught in it one could calculate the exact number of young fishes that passed through the channel. However, this trap admitted a certain number of fishes while being lowered in the water before the timing started, and the same thing happened again when it was drawn out after ten minutes, for it was a heavy thing and could not be pulled out of the water quickly enough. Naturally, with such rough calculations, the official reports sent up to headquarters contained almost astronomical figures of fish fry ostensibly rescued.

"Why, it's just eye-wash," Vitya had complained to Zubov. "They save a million fry and report two million. What sort of check recording is that?"

And so Vitya, scribbling designs all over his exercise books, toiled for a month over the construction of a new trap. He ruined many a stool of Marfa's, broke up the old bedstead in the loft, spent whole evenings planing, sawing, and carving, and fiddled about for hours with the sand-glass. Finally he hit on the missing detail.

Vitya's creative throes bore fruit at last in the shape of a damper—an ordinary stove-damper. One day he had

closed the flue too soon and let poisonous fumes into the room, for which he was rewarded with a clout on the head from his mother. While Vitya was reflecting sadly on stoves in general and chimney-dampers in particular, it suddenly flashed upon him that the damper was the very thing he had been looking for.

The next day the new trap was completed. Vitya's invention was a very simple one. He made slits in the frame and inserted in them a square tin slide resembling a stove-damper. The trap could now be opened and shut in a split second, like a camera slide plate.

And now, on this warm summer day, Vitya Sazonov was at last able to demonstrate his invention to the whole village. He shot the slide home, set the trap leisurely in the ditch, stuffed up the gaps between the frame and the side of the ditch with stones and rushes, then got up and said sedately to Grunya: "Well, shall we set it?"

"Go ahead, Vitya," Grunya assented, glancing at her wrist watch.

Vitya, with a dexterous movement of his left hand, turned over the ten-minute sand-glass, and with his right hand pulled out the slide of his own invention. All the fish, carried along by the current, swam into the net. The fishermen watched Vitya with amusement, while he cocked a bright, saucy eye at the sand-glass, and his vivacious, freckled face froze in an expression of austere solemnity. At the very moment when the last grain of sand dropped into the lower compartment, Vitya snapped the slide home and stepped aside.

"You can count the fish fry now," he said. "That's what I call an accurate check."

Professor Shchetinin, who had been sitting a little apart on a heap of rushes and staring intently at Vitya's trap, beckoned the boy up and said, knitting his shaggy brows: "Your name's Sazonov?"

"Yes, Victor Petrovich Sazonov," answered Vitya.

"D'you go to school?"

"Yes."

"What form?"

"The seventh."

Shchetinin surveyed Vitya from head to foot through his gleaming lenses.

"You could do with a hair-cut, Victor Petrovich. You look like a long-haired priest, and that's not a very pretty sight."

"The barbershop's at the other end of the stanitsa," Vitya stammered. "And the barber's never there—he's either drinking vodka or angling on the river."

"I see," Shchetinin murmured, nodding his grey head. "And what are you going to be, Victor Petrovich?"

Digging his bare toes into the lake ooze that lay drying in the sun, Vitya looked boldly at the professor's glasses and answered: "I was thinking of going to the fishery school, and afterwards to Moscow, of course, to the—what-d'you-call-it—the institute."

"I see," the old man chuckled. "D'you think it's an easy job?"

"Maybe it isn't, but I'm going just the same," Vitya repeated doggedly.

The eyes of the morose old man warmed up for a second under the glasses, like thawed blue patches on a frozen river.

"Well, Victor Petrovich, go ahead, we'll see how you get along. I'm going to write to the Fish Industry Minister to-night about your check-trap. Understand?"

"I understand," Vitya said, flushing. No longer able to restrain his delight, he scampered away and disappeared in the rushes.

Shchetinin then beckoned Grunya to him, asked her about Vitya, and reminded her that people had to be placed all along the connecting channel and the river-bank to protect the fish fry from birds.

"You can send the school children there," he said. "Let them stand guard till the evening, otherwise the birds will destroy a lot of fry."

In fact, flocks of birds, scenting prey, were already flying about over the meadow. Blue-black crows were hopping about from mound to mound, and cormorants and gulls flew over the water with little fishes gleaming in their beaks.

After placing the school children along the banks of the ditch and telling them what they had to do, Grunya galloped off to Petrovskoye Lake, to which Antropov's and Talalayev's teams had been transferred. She inspected the route of the new channel, chatting with people along the way. Then she rode slowly across the flood meadow, feeling very tired.

The sun was going down. The square patches of tilth on the green flood meadow, which had just been ploughed up by the collective farm, turned dark. Long-beaked rooks strutted gravely among the furrows, and fussy black-and-white lapwings hopped about among them. The horse, his neck caked with dust and sweat, trudged wearily over the grass, discontentedly champing the bit and nibbling at the rising quitch. Grunya had spent the whole day in the saddle, and her legs were numb, her back ached, and her weathered face burned. With the reins resting on the pommel, she rode across the flood meadow bathed in the glow of the setting sun, sighing and thinking of Vasili, whom she had not seen since the morning.

They met on the bank of the Nizenki, where Vasili was supervising the bailing out of the fish fry which the office workers' scratch team had caught at Silt Lake. He noticed Grunya from afar, and slinging his leather case over his shoulder, went forward to meet her, smiling and mopping his hot, red face.

Grunya reined in the horse and waited for Vasili by a knoll where she knew none of the girls could see them.

He came up laughing, looked up into Grunya's eyes, and playfully pressed his cheek to her knee, which was stained green with grass.

She coloured deeply, passed her hand in confusion over his hair, and with a catch in her breath, murmured reprovingly: "Oh, Vasya...."

He looked up at her face, covered with trickles of sweat, and at her chapped lips, and patted the tired horse. "Well?" he laughed. "It's good, isn't it?"

"What is?"

He drank in the air, fragrant with the smell of meadow grasses. "Everything is, darling—the river, the woods, the fish fry, the birds, and you!"

The first day's rescue work was over. In the evening the checkers gave Grunya their reports. In fifteen hours the fishermen had saved from imminent death a vast number of young fishes—carps, breams, pike-perches, herrings, and other valuable food-fish.

That evening Avdei Talalayev, the ferryman, made preparations for night fishing.

"They're all fagged out," he told Yegor and Trifon with a chuckle. "Running about all day, saving the fish fry—why, they'll sleep like logs. All the better for us—we'll slip down to Zamanukha with a couple of purse-nets. I've got some extra fine nets hidden away—not a single fish will escape through them."

"What about those public inspectors, though?" Trifon said, chewing a straw. "If the inspector goes to sleep, those public fellows are likely to be on the beat."

"I've seen to that," old Avdei reassured him. "My brother Pimen is on duty at Zamanukha to-night."

The poachers would probably have got away with it this time, too, but for an unforeseen circumstance. After a fatiguing day on the meadow, Zubov lay fast asleep in

his bed. Pimen Talalayev, knowing that his brother and nephew would be out fishing that night at Zamanukha, made a pretence of patrolling the river in the evening, then went home to sleep. Nevertheless, the ferryman's plan miscarried.

It happened in this way. Irina Gnachova, the buoy-keeper's daughter, noticing the preparations at the ferryman's hut as she was returning home from the vegetable plot, went to see Tosya and warned her that something was afoot. The girls ran down to the woods, hid themselves in the thickets, and kept a look-out on the river. They saw a boat at the dam, heard the water splash as the net was cast, and then saw the boat put ashore, while the crew dumped the fish into sacks. The girls recognized the voices of Yegor Talalayev and Trifon.

"This net Dad has given us is too damn fine," Yegor growled in the dark. "Look at the rubbish we've landed!"

Pressing close to her friend, Tosya whispered in her ear: "The dirty rats! We've been rescuing fry all day long, working like devils, and now they're going to feed it to their pigs!"

Waiting until the boat put away from the shore, the girls ran off to Zubov's lodgings as fast as their legs could carry them. They roused Marfa and told her to call the inspector, and when Vasili came out rubbing his sleepy eyes, the two girls broke out excitedly, both speaking at once: "Poachers are fishing down at Zamanukha! They're fishing with a fine net, taking heaps of fry!"

Vasili was wide awake in an instant. He slipped on his jacket and slung the pistol belt over his shoulder. He shook Vitya awake and told him to get dressed at once. He told the girls to run down to the under-inspector and show him the path by which the poachers were carrying the fish away.

"You come along with me," he shouted to Vitya. "We have no time to wait for the motor-man."

Stumbling in the dark, they ran down to the river where the *Sterlet* lay at her moorings. Vasili swiftly unfastened the tarpaulin sheets covering her hatches, and while Vitya was unlocking the mooring-chain, started the engine. Five minutes later the quivering *Sterlet*, with thudding pistons, described a semicircle and shot upstream, leaving a spummy track behind her.

At the same instant a red light flashed on at the ferry.

Old Avdei need not have taken the trouble to signal. The poachers immediately heard the frantic drumming of the motor boat's engine. Yegor began feverishly plying the oars. Trifon threw the catch overboard and was about to sink the net when the roaring *Sterlet*, shuddering throughout her hull, came tearing up in a cloud of petrol fumes.

Zubov trained his flash-light on the boat and shouted: "Row to the shore!"

"Who're you to be giving us orders?" Yegor answered insolently. "We've seen your likes before!"

The flash-light beam slid over his clammy face, and Vasili repeated angrily: "That'll do, row to the shore, I tell you!"

"Drop it, Yegor," Trifon whined. "If Comrade Inspector tells us to put ashore, we've got to do as he tells us. He's only doing his duty."

The rowlocks began to creak.

Trifon, obviously for Zubov's benefit, said in a placating tone: "Comrade Inspector will look over our boat and see for himself that we haven't been fishing. Just having some fun. People aren't punished for that, are they?"

The boat, convoyed by the *Sterlet*, bumped into the steep bank. All stepped ashore, except Vitya. Vasili followed the poachers, stumbling over stones in the dark

and choking with rage. When they ascended the bank and halted on the fringe of the woods, Vasili turned his flash-light on the sullen faces of the poachers and snapped: "Who gave you the right to fish with purse-nets?"

"We weren't fishing," Yegor snapped back, glaring at Vasili with hatred in his eyes. "We were admiring the scenery and taking a whiff of fresh air."

"Stop playing the fool, Talalayev," Zubov said sharply. "I ask you, who gave you permission to enter a prohibited zone and fish with prohibited tackle?"

Yegor, however, put on a brave front. Thrusting his hands into his pockets, he went up closer and said truculently: "Come to mention it, Comrade Inspector, it's you who are in a prohibited zone, not us. I'm the chief electrician here, and I'm on the territory by rights, but why are you hanging about here without a pass, I'd like to know——"

"Shut up!" Zubov shouted. "I see you want to get yourself into more trouble!"

Yegor was about to make some fresh remark when a noise was heard coming from the woods, and Prokhorov, with the carbine over his shoulder, came down to the bank followed by Tosya Belyavskaya.

"We found six baskets full of fish there," the under-inspector reported to Zubov. "Our men are looking after them."

"Good, Ivan Nikanorovich. Take the nets and draw up a report," Vasili said. "We'll send it to headquarters to-morrow."

An official statement was drawn up, and two days later the decision of the fishery inspector at district headquarters was received. Yegor Talalayev and Trifon were fined a hundred rubles each and their nets were confiscated. Avdei got off scot-free, since Yegor and his pal had not said a word about him.

One would have expected Yegor to lie low after this incident. But after paying the fine, he told his father the same evening: "Just the same, I won't give in to Zubov. He's picked on the wrong man."

Trifon tried to remonstrate with his tipsy pal, but the latter stuck out his jaw and repeated: "He'd better keep out of my way, the skunk. There isn't room for the two of us on one path."

"What, still got a grudge against him on account of Grunya?" Trifon rallied him.

"Grunya be damned! She's got nothing to do with it. It's this fellow who thinks he's going to boss the show here. Until he came, men lived as men live everywhere. And now that tin god wants to turn everything upside down. I'll get even with him, yet."

He banged his fist on the table and added threateningly: "He'll rue it, but it'll be too late!"

CHAPTER FOUR

1

Mosolov waited impatiently for the day when the beluga expedition would start its work. Close-season was still in force on the middle reaches of the river, but Mosolov knew that fishing for scientific purposes was permitted at any time and place and with every means of capture. Professor Shchetinin was interested only in the beluga, and Mosolov had been told that all the other fish caught in the nets would go to fulfil the fishery's annual plan.

The catch plan was causing Mosolov great anxiety. The thought that it might not be fulfilled preyed on his mind. What worried him still more was his talk with Zubov. "Somehow I can't get this straight," he thought. "My chiefs demand fish, and this youngster sticks to his own guns. I daresay he's right—the stocks in the river are really running low."

Mosolov rightly considered himself to be a man of action. As a tank-driver during the war, he had efficiently carried out every combat order, and was accustomed to his powerful T-34, which, primed and stocked with ammunition, worked with the precision of a chronometer.

Here, in the fishing kolkhoz, everything seemed different. Naturally, the catch plan, as far as Mosolov was concerned, was an order which had to be promptly

executed, but there was a good deal here that required collective discussion and checking. People made proposals, argued, debated, and sat in conference day and night, and Mosolov could not always make up his mind as to who was right and who was wrong.

In the evenings the chairman would come to the little laboratory barn, and standing in the doorway for several minutes in silence, would finally inquire: "Well? How goes it?"

"Splendid," Zubov would answer.

Mosolov would examine the eggs in the apparatus, then say with a guilty air: "It's really working out splendidly!"

Vasili smiled with pleasure, offered Mosolov a cigarette, and said dreamily: "One day we'll start experiments in cross-breeding and try to create new species of fish. Cross-breeding gives very interesting results. The progeny seem to grow bigger and quicker than the parents. Of course, it's difficult to make cross-breeding experiments under these conditions, but if we had a hatchery now——"

"All right," Mosolov said with a smile, "give us time, we'll see about a hatchery."

The more often Mosolov came to the barn the stronger the conviction grew upon him that Zubov was right and that the kolkhoz fishermen should tackle the problem of stock replenishment in real earnest. But every day the kolkhoz office received letters and telegrams from town demanding reports on the progress of the fulfilment. Mosolov scratched his head as he read these letters, and thought: "I wish the professor would hurry up and start fishing...."

The river was almost back in its banks after the flood, and all the dam uprights had been raised. The huge wooden sluice-gates, covered with mossy green mould, were reinstalled, and the river was severed in two from

bank to bank. Regulated by the sluice-gates, the head water rushed down with a fierce roar, forming a seething cauldron of milk-white foam under the spillway. The head race, bolstered by the weir-dam, rose two metres above the lower level.

The day when the dam's uprights rose out of the water and white foam began to swirl round the sluice-gates, the upstream path of the spawning fish was cut off. Before them stood an impassable wall, which shuddered from the impacts of the roaring water.

This also was the time when the anadromous belugas began to collect around the dam.

Professor Shchetinin sat on the high bank, watching the river for hours at a stretch. Nothing escaped the trained eye of the old man. He saw the wild sport of the young fishes in the green water and the lobsters crawling over the light sandy bed. He was stirred from his placidity only when a beluga, breaking the silence, suddenly flung its great hulk out of the water and vanished into the depths again.

What governed the behaviour of this fish? What instinct yearly drove it from the sea to the upper reaches of the river to spawn in the very same breeding-grounds where its ancestors had spawned before it for thousands of years? Why did it so stubbornly and persistently seek only those breeding-grounds and no others, depositing there a multitude of eggs? What laws produced in it that curious degeneration of the unspawned eggs? It was a fact that a beluga spawner, if prevented from reaching its spawning-ground and compelled to run its sharp head helplessly against obstructions that rose in its path, would not spawn. It will swim from bank to bank for a long time, searching for a loop-hole by which to ascend the river. It will buffet its nose against the ironwork of the dam, and its struggles will grow ever fiercer until the water is stained pink with its blood. Hundreds of

fishes will flock round to peck the floating bits of cartilage from the beluga's smashed snout, but the maddened spawner, suffering agony from the weight of its spawn, will go on attempting to break down the unbreakable barrier. Finally, she will swim away from the dam and wander aimlessly about the river without having deposited a single egg. The millions of spawn in her belly will gradually close over with fat and lose their vitality. And the scientist, ripping open the belly of a dry spawner caught by some fisherman, will say that the eggs in her have degenerated.

Professor Shchetinin knew this as well as he knew all the hundreds of terms and definitions explaining the migration of fish and the methods of their propagation. But the old man wanted to delve deeper than these familiar formulas and discover at all costs a method of preserving the beluga, which was obviously dying out.

"We've upset the laws of beluga propagation with these dams and we must help the fish," Shchetinin kept repeating. "We can't leave it to the mercy of fate."

"It's a waste of time," his colleagues would protest. "Nature is too strong for us."

"Nonsense!" Shchetinin would shout angrily. "This fish is the pride of our country. The wonderful caviar it gives us is famous all over the world. We must save the beluga for the future."

"He's on a wild goose chase," sceptics averred. "Just wasting his time."

"And state funds, too."

"Well, time will show."

Shchetinin was aware of this talk. He was none too confident of the success of his enterprise himself, since beluga spawners had never before been transplanted across a dam and the results of such an experiment were unpredictable. But he knew one thing—that fish scientists could not sit with folded hands waiting until the last of

the belugas disappeared. It was for this reason he had decided to stake his scientific reputation and risk transplanting the fish across the dam.

And although Mosolov and Golovnev were burning with impatience to fulfil their plans thanks to the beluga expedition, Shchetinin was inflexible, and would not be hurried into giving permission to start fishing until all the preparations were completed.

First of all well-vessels had to be prepared for transporting the fish across the lock. Two lighters, towed up by the *Bream*, were used for this purpose. Big trap-doors were cut into their sides below the water line and the holds filled with water, turning them into floating well-vessels.

Non-corrosive tabs with a number stamped on them were made under Shchetinin's supervision for marking the belugas. These were to be attached to the fishes by a fine pliable wire with a special covering resembling the insulation of flex. The professor then selected in the kolkhoz yard the strongest nets and cords for nooses, had a long smooth stick made for measuring the gigantic fish, marked off the centimetres on it himself, and gave orders for all this tackle to be sent down to the fishing-ground.

Shchetinin fixed the first beluga fishing for Friday, and asked Mosolov to have both teams out at Talovaya by six in the morning.

Sunrise found the whole stanitsa on the left bank. Every villager was eager to see the unusual spectacle.

Talovaya was a long strip of shelving sandy bank. A little way back from the water rose alluvial deposits overgrown with osiers and willows, and still farther loomed the dark green thickets of Poplar Wood. Usually a deep stillness reigned over the woods, broken only by an occasional splash of frisking fish or the mellow notes of the cuckoo in the woods. That morning, however, the place was alive with sound. The fishermen, waiting for

orders to cast the nets, were engaged in lively conversation; the children romped about; the seine-boats creaked under their load of nets; and the clatter of the *Bream's* gear mingled with the clank of anchor-chains, the splash of oars, and the hum of the crowd.

Shchetinin alone looked calm and seemingly unaffected by the general excitement. He stood on a knoll in his invariable sand-coloured tweeds, heavy boots, and regulation cap, from under the broad peak of which his glasses glinted.

The old man stood lost in thought, his grey head bent, smoking cigarette after cigarette and listening to the monotonous splash of the water.

"Shall we start, Ilya Afanasievich?" Zubov asked him. "The fishermen are waiting."

The old man looked at him blankly. "Oh, it's you?" he sighed. "Yes, yes. Let's begin. Have the *Bream* tow the well-boats lower downstream and cast anchor. And tell them not to make such a noise on the bank there—it's given me a headache...."

Zubov passed Shchetinin's orders on, then asked him again: "Can we begin?"

The old man took a burning-glass out of the pocket of his crumpled trousers, focussed the white spot of the sun's hot ray on his rolled cigarette, and inhaled the strong smoke. "Go ahead," he said, with a look at the river.

The big fishing-boat, obeying the thrust of ten oars, put off from the shore and headed for midstream. The fishermen, stripped to the waist, began to cast the seine. The boat crossed the fairway and closed with the right bank, taking in the enormous width of the river, and leaving in its wake a line of floats bobbing on the water.

Shchetinin said to Mosolov: "Tell them to cast a second seine round the first one, otherwise the beluga will tear the netting and escape."

At Mosolov's signal, the emergency boat pushed off and Pimen Talalayev's fishermen began to shoot the second seine.

Shchetinin called Zubov over.

"Is that little girl here—the pisciculturist?" he asked.

"No, I didn't see her," Vasili answered, avoiding the old man's eyes. "I think she's busy preparing a report to the Komsomol meeting."

"Send the motor boat for her at once, I need her."

"I'll go for her myself," Vasili said quickly. "Is there any message?"

Shchetinin took his cap off, wiped his perspiring forehead, and sighed.

"Tell that girl that I need wise and gentle hands for marking the beluga. D'you understand? Tell her I can't entrust it to the fishermen who will tear the fish's nostrils with the wire and injure the spawners. Ask her in my name to help me with this."

Shaking awake the motor-man who was asleep in the stern of the *Sterlet*, Zubov raced off to fetch Grunya. He repeated Shchetinin's request word for word. Grunya made Vasili sit in the passage while she swiftly changed into an old red *sarafan*.

"Oh, Vasya, how am I going to do it?" she faltered, all agog with excitement. "Is that what he really said—that he needs wise hands? And gentle ones?"

"Never mind that now, hurry up, darling!" Vasili said impatiently. "The professor is waiting."

By the time they arrived on the left bank the nets were already being hauled in. The young fishermen, with shining perspiring backs, were moving slowly over the deep sun-warmed sand, drawing in the huge seine. No one knew whether there was a beluga in the purse, for the seine still moved in deep water and was not likely to frighten the huge fish. The buoyed head line drew steadily nearer to the shore.

A light boat with a single oarsman passed up and down the curved line of bobbing floats. Antropov lay face downwards in the bow, peering into the water. His arms bared to the elbow, he ran his hands over the head line and felt the commotion of the fish trapped in the purse.

Hundreds of eyes watched him intently from the bank, gazing spell-bound at the smooth river.

Suddenly his hand running along the line felt it give a tremendous heave.

"We've got one!" Antropov shouted.

The crowd rushed down to the water's edge. Within ten minutes both wings had been hauled on to the sand, and the purse, almost bursting with fish, crawled slowly out of the water. Small fishes, with a gleam of silver and gold, fluttered on the sand. Suddenly there was a heavy splash, followed by a second, and the ash-grey hulk of a huge eight-hundred-pound beluga appeared out of the turbid water, lashing up the sand.

Like bear-hunters rushing in to the kill, the fishermen, stumbling over nets and ropes, hurled themselves at the writhing beluga.

And then, drowning the clamour and shouts of the fishermen, Professor Shchetinin roared as he rushed into the water: "Careful, damn you! It's a spawner!"

Talalayev and his mate threw a strong noose over the fish's body, drawing it close below the pectoral fins, and with the help of six other fishermen towed it carefully towards the shore.

It now lay quiet, its ten-foot body stretched motionless on the sand and its oddly small eyes ringed with glimmering yellowish circles staring up into the sky. Rows of sharp little bony plates stood out on its ash-coloured spine, sides, and heavy white belly, and its short peaked nose seemed translucent in the sun. But for the laboured movement of the gills it might have been dead.

Shchetinin bent over the fish, touched its slippery skull, and said musingly: "Surprisingly archaic, come to think of it. What prehistoric forms!"

Grunya, her wet *sarafan* pressed between her knees, threaded a thin wire through the beluga's nostrils with infinite care and attached a small brass tab to it.

Five minutes later the fishermen dragged the fish out into deep water and slowly towed it to where the *Bream* lay riding at anchor. The fishermen opened the side hatch of the well-boat and carefully pushed the beluga into it without removing the noose.

Four more belugas were caught at Talovaya that day. They were all measured, marked, and towed into the well-boats. Besides the belugas the fishermen caught sixteen tons of other fish which they took in barges to the jetty and delivered to the curing-shop.

Late in the afternoon Shchetinin, wiping his sand-spattered glasses with a weary gesture, said to Vasili and Grunya: "Would you like to see our beauties let out of the well-boats?"

The motor boat carried them alongside the *Bream*, and they boarded the launch. The sun was sinking towards the river bend and a chill was creeping in from the woods. Grunya, hunching her sun-scorched shoulders and drawing up her bare legs, shivered and tried to get a seat nearer to the engine-room. Vasili slipped off his jacket and threw it over the girl's shoulders.

Shchetinin glanced at the young couple, sighed, went below, and returned with a rain-coat.

"Put it on," he said to Grunya.

"Oh, thank you! You shouldn't have bothered!" the girl said abashed. "I'm getting warm already, really——"

"Come along, put it on!" the professor repeated gruffly, looking on while Grunya wrapped the baggy old-fashioned rain-coat about her.

As soon as the *Bream* had locked through towing the

well-boat after her, Shchetinin began to pace the narrow deck, saying in a slightly hoarse voice: "The ancient Ganoidei forms have survived in the beluga through thousands of years. Did you notice the pattern of the cranial plates, the rows of bony scales on the body? Yes, the beluga is an ancient fish . . . very ancient. To be sure, it has changed through the ages, but these modifications, for some reason, are too negligible to . . . yes, too negligible. . . ."

Shchetinin seemed to be thinking aloud. Zubov knew this habit of his old teacher's and had no difficulty in following his drift. The old man took off his glasses, turned his tired face to Vasili and Grunya, and smiled in a boyish way.

"It will be a shame if it disappears, won't it?"

"If what disappears?" Grunya queried.

"The beluga."

When the *Bream* stopped, they crossed over to a well-boat by a gang-plank. Two fishermen opened the side hatches, led the belugas up to the openings, and removing the nooses, gently pushed them out into the river. The belugas swam out of the well-boats, stood still for several seconds twitching their tails, then slowly, almost unwillingly, sank into the dark depths.

Shchetinin followed them with anxiously watchful eyes, and said: "Swim away, you have a clear path. And we'll be waiting to hear what you have to tell us. . . ."

2

Having been told by the villagers that the midges would disappear with the coming of the dragon-flies, Zubov waited impatiently for that to happen. Myriads of vicious midges were driving people to the verge of distraction. They rose with the sun in a dark cloud and flew

about till late in the night. The women working on the vegetable plots sought refuge in shawls which they wrapped about their heads, while the fishermen covered their faces and necks with pieces of netting dipped in kerosene.

Zubov, who was not inured to it, was driven to despair. He wandered miserably about the stanitsa, his swollen face scratched and bleeding, asking querulously: "When is this torture going to end?"

Then one hot day the first dragon-flies appeared over the flood meadow. Their transparent wings glittering in the sun, they flew round the green orchards, lakeside thickets, and woods and basked in the clear sunny air, which smelt sweetly of grasses. Every day their numbers increased. Vasili did not see them hunting midges, and was surprised the way those harassing swarms dwindled and melted away as if by magic.

Professor Shchetinin alone seemed impervious to the midges and did not even notice that they had disappeared. He spent whole days at the fishing-grounds, where he supervised the beluga catch, sauntered gloomily on the edge of Poplar Wood, or lay down on the hot sand to jot down some notes in a creased copy-book. His faded suit merged with the colour of the sand, making him almost indistinguishable from a distance. The fishermen often looked for him in the bushes, thinking he was seeking the shade; but upon hearing his name called, he would get up from a sandy knoll and go down to the bank, where he would silently examine the catch.

Vasili knew that the old man was worried. The professor was impatient to learn how the transplanted belugas were behaving in the spawning-beds, and whether they had not been injured during their passage through the lock. No one could answer those questions for him. Somewhere on the spawning-grounds twenty-nine milers and

spawners were at large in the river depths. But how soon would the mute river tell him what was happening in the water? Who could possibly keep a constant watch on the marked belugas?

Shchetinin often borrowed Zubov's motor boat, and passing through the lock, manoeuvred for hours round the spot where the belugas had been released. Standing in the bow with a pair of field-glasses, he scanned the smooth surface of the river in the hope that the huge fish would give some sign of itself by a splash or a ripple. He had long talks with the buoy-keepers, the foresters, and the fishermen of the fishing kolkhozes upstream, asking whether anyone had heard, or seen any sign, of a beluga. But people answered that they had seen nothing.

Several days passed. The fishermen caught and carried across the dam another thirteen belugas, but of those that had been previously transplanted no one knew anything.

One evening, while Vasili was helping Marfa to dig up the vegetable garden and exchanging idle banter with Vitya, Grunya came running into the yard. This surprised Vasili, for Grunya had never come to Marfa's house before. She looked frightened, and had come barefoot in her haste.

"Where is Ilya Afanasievich?" she cried, flushed and breathless.

Vasili went over to the wicket with the spade in his hands. "What's the matter, Grunya?" he said.

"Oh, Vasya, the fishers have caught a beluga out there," she faltered, glancing around as though afraid she might be overheard.

"What of it?" Vasili said, lifting his eyebrows. "What beluga?"

"One of the labelled ones, Vasya! We must find Ilya Afanasievich!"

Grunya ran away from the wicket, then came back and whispered: "D'you know, Vasya, that beluga—it's——"

"It's what?"

"It's dead, Vasya—all bruised—the water threw it up over the dam—the boys saw it and told the fishermen—they've dragged it out on to the bank——"

"Where is it now?" Vasili said, laying the spade aside.

"At the fishing-ground. Everyone's down there. The chairman's there, too, and all the team-leaders. Only Ilya Afanasievich isn't there, and I don't know where to find him——"

Vitya, who was standing by, looking from Vasili to Grunya, suddenly dropped his rake and dashed out into the street.

"I'll find him in a tick!" he shouted as he ran. "I saw him ride out to the field with the Secretary of the Party Committee."

Vasili and Grunya went down to the river. The motor-man took them over to the left bank and was about to follow them, but Vasili told him to go back and wait for Shchetinin so as to take him across as soon as he turned up.

A crowd stood around the dead beluga, which had been dragged out on to the sand. The huge fish, with its white swollen belly, lay like a log. Its glassy eyes, sides, and flippers were covered with sand, but even through the sand one could see the long abrasions, bruises, and gashes showing livid on its body like the terrible marks of the bastinado.

"Battered all over!" the fishermen cried wonderingly.

"Clotted blood under the gills!"

"And the skin torn off!"

The bronzed, broad-shouldered fishermen walked

slowly round the beluga, touching its sides and shaking their heads; then they stepped aside and cast anxious glances at the right bank.

"He's coming!" the boys yelled.

"The professor's coming!"

The motor boat ran its bow into the sand almost at full speed. At the sight of Shchetinin the fishermen fell silent.

He walked hatless, his tunic unbuttoned and hands clasped behind his back. He was followed by Nazarov, the Secretary of the D.P.C.

For a long time he stood near the dead beluga with his head bent, seemingly unaware of the people crowding round him, of the river, and of the sun going down beyond the bend.

"Yes," he said at last in a hoarse voice. "A f-failure."

Nazarov took the old man gently by the elbow and moved off with him down the bank.

"A failure?" he asked.

"Yes, Tikhon Filippovich, it hasn't worked," Shchetinin said with a despairing gesture. "That was fish No. 4—a female with unspawned eggs...."

"Wait a minute," Nazarov said quietly. "You have to face this calmly. You must look for the reason."

Nazarov was upset himself and at a loss how to comfort the professor. Still holding him under the elbow, he changed his tone for one of gentle remonstrance.

"There may be all kinds of reasons, Ilya Afanasievich. You have to get to the bottom of it, think it out. Isn't that right?"

"The thing's clear," Shchetinin said bleakly. "Death was due to internal haemorrhage."

"And the bruises?"

"The noose accounts for that. It caused trauma—the fish must have struggled in the well-boat—the result was n-nervous shock and death...."

"The cause must be removed then," Nazarov said. "You must find other ways of transplanting the fish."

Nazarov's heart was wrung with pity for Shchetinin, and putting his arm round the professor's shoulders, he led him towards the motor boat.

"Let's go home," he said, "and put our heads together. Eh?"

"Yes, let us go," Shchetinin weakly submitted. "Only t-tell them to take the tab off the d-dead beluga."

3

During the spring spate over two hundred acres of wheat and barley crops had been flooded on the Golubovskaya collective farm. The water had washed away the top soil, razed all the furrows, and swept millions of wheat shoots out into the river. Two hundred acres of cornfield had been turned into a black swamp on which the wind-borne seeds of weed plants later struck root.

Nazarov decided to inspect the damage himself, and while he was at it, look into the general condition of the farm lands. He intended afterwards to raise the question of reorganizing the Golubovskaya collective farm, which suffered annually from the floods and never had a real chance of making headway.

That farm's plight had often caused him uneasiness. The Secretary of the District Party Committee was an old Communist and experience had taught him that there was no difficulty which Soviet people could not overcome by dint of hard work and determination. He was fond of repeating the now proverbial maxim that "there are no fortresses that the Bolsheviks cannot capture," and was confident that the Soviet man would never bow his head before difficulties. However, all the

farm's arable land was situated in the flood meadow, and the yearly inundation was inescapable. Every spring the Golubovskaya collective farmers reported crops ruined by the flood, and every year the district commission drew up an official statement registering a natural calamity. This irritated Nazarov, and he decided to make a study of the farm and ask the regional agricultural authorities to allow it to switch over to stock-breeding and market-gardening.

Nazarov expected to spend five or six days in the stanitsa. He lodged with the farm chairman, Zakhar Petrovich Bugrov, whose house stood on a hill by the Barsovska, close to the farm's vineyards.

Zakhar Bugrov, a Golubovskaya Cossack born and bred, was a calm man of few words. Tall, with fair close-cropped hair, he walked about with a slight stoop. He was what people call a plodder. He was no lover of idle talk, spoke in monosyllables, and shrank from addressing meetings. On the other hand he spent days on end in the fields, orchards, and gardens, and sometimes did not come home for weeks at a time, sleeping somewhere in a tractor-drivers' cabin, at the bee-garden, or on the threshing-floor.

When Bugrov was a lad of twenty, he had been one of the first to join the collective farm, working as swineherd, cowherd, checker, storekeeper, and field team-leader. He was not taken into the army owing to an injury to the fingers of his left hand sustained in childhood while unpacking a shot-gun shell. Before the fascists came he left the stanitsa, driving off the kolkhoz herd numbering fifteen hundred sheep, cattle, and horses. He drove the herd through the steppe, and across rivers, valleys, and hills for forty days, looking back to see the sky aflame with conflagrations. Finally he reached the mountain villages of Daghestan, where he spent six months. When the fascists were defeated, he drove

his herd home again. After the war the collective farmers elected him chairman of the collective farm.

Nazarov admired the Golubovskaya farm chairman for his honesty and industry, for his calm disposition, modesty and simple manners. But he often rallied the chairman for not reading enough, for not taking an interest in agricultural innovations, and generally doing little to educate himself.

"You'd better look out, Zakhar Petrovich," he would warn Bugrov. "In a year or two you'll find yourself straggling at the tail-end."

Soon after his present arrival at the stanitsa, Nazarov had attended a meeting of the farm board, inspected the dairy-farm, the apiary, and the poultry-yard, and discussed farm affairs with Bugrov in the evenings.

"You haven't enough cows," he told Bugrov, "and those you have are poor milkers. You've got to increase the cattle herd. How are you off for fodder?"

"We have enough fodder," Bugrov answered. "Over a thousand acres of flood meadows alone."

"And good grass, I daresay?"

"Not bad, a bit worse than the steppe grass, but our animals are used to meadow hay."

"There, you see! And you've only three dozen mongrel cattle grazing on a thousand acres. Is that the way to run a farm?"

Nazarov sighed, pulled out a threadbare tobacco-pouch, and rolled himself a cigarette. He lit up and said: "To-morrow we'll have a look at your hayfields. We'll take Professor Shchetinin along, the piscatologist. I'm sorry for the old man. He's got trouble with those belugas."

Early the next morning Nazarov, Bugrov, and Shchetinin rode out to the flood meadow in the farm's *droshky*. Nazarov had some difficulty in dragging the professor out of the house, but he persuaded him that

the trip would be interesting and would keep him from brooding.

The sleek horses trotted over the grassy ground, tossing their heads and swishing their tails angrily to drive off the pestering gad-flies. Shchetinin sat next to the driver, staring moodily at the horses' brown cruppers from which the white foam flew away in flakes. Nazarov and Bugrov discussed farm affairs.

By midday they had visited all the hayfields, and Nazarov asked Bugrov to drive down to the fields which had been ruined during the flood. The driver turned his horses off into a country lane overgrown with couch-grass. In a quarter of an hour they reached a black field which looked as though it had been newly ploughed.

"There it is, our curse," Bugrov said with a wave of his hand. "Look at it. Folks worked it autumn and spring, put ten tons of graded seeds into it, and got paid for the job; and the river gobbled it all up, didn't leave a grain."

They alighted.

Before them lay a sweep of black, hard, cracked earth with puddles gleaming here and there. Silt and alluvial deposits washed up by the flood dotted the ruined cornfield. The whole dead waste resembled a battlefield over which a fire had swept, devouring all the grass.

"Yes," Nazarov murmured, "looks as if Jenghiz Khan's been here."

Old Shchetinin dragged his feet wearily over the dark field and examined the ground. Then he came back to the roadside and said: "These things are going out of fashion. We now have our Dnieper power plant, the Farkhad hydro-electric station, the White Sea-Baltic Canal. S-soviet people have learned to control Nature. They have made the M-moscow Sea and irrigated the Hungry Steppe. They'll p-pacify this river, too."

"That they will," Nazarov said. "It's absurd—thousands of acres of wheat are flooded out here while in the east, right next door, you have arid, barren steppes. How can we put up with such a thing!"

Shchetinin took off his cap, mopped his brow with a handkerchief, and wiped his glasses.

"I'm c-confident that we'll tackle this river, too," he said. "We'll build an immense reservoir here, a water-power station, and c-canals. It's a question of the immediate f-future. I have foreseen this and want to teach the fish new ways."

He touched the farm chairman's sleeve. "Tell me this, Zakhar Petrovich, do you consider this land ruined after the crops have been killed?"

"Why, no!" Bugrov said, smiling. "We're going to sow late crops on it—maize and sunflower, and plant melons."

"C-could you cultivate l-legumes on it?"

"Yes, why not?"

Still gripping the chairman's sleeve, Shchetinin went on questioning him. "So you think that after the f-flood this land is fit for the cultivation of l-late crops?"

"Certainly."

"And the excessive moisture in the soil won't be a hindrance?"

"Not at all. It will even be helpful, you might say, because there are certain crops that are fond of moisture," Bugrov answered.

On their way back to the stanitsa Shchetinin carried on a lively conversation with Nazarov about the future of fish husbandry.

"To-day we have only one small dam on the river," he said, holding his faded cap on his knees, "but you and I will live to see the day when a huge dam will span the whole valley. It will check the spate, which means there will be no more spring floods. The meadows won't

be s-submerged and the fishes' spawning-beds will disappear. Navigable locks will form a permanent barrier preventing the fish from ascending the river. N-nature will change its face and the regimen of the river will be altered. Do you realize what it will mean for the f-fish industry?"

He paused, then went on, bringing every word out clearly: "One of two things will happen—either we will remodel our fisheries or we'll be left without fish."

"How's that?" Bugrov asked.

"If the fish lose their breeding-homes they won't p-propagate," Shchetinin explained. "C-consequently, we must breed fishes ourselves, and after the river is harnessed, we shall have to lay out new breeding- and rearing-grounds, so-called f-fish farms."

"Fish farms?" Nazarov queried. "What's that, something like a state farm?"

"If you wish, yes. A state fish farm with specialized breeds, r-regulated feeding, and new methods of rearing young b-beluga, sturgeon, carp, and bream. That will be communist fish husbandry, the only one of its kind in the world. We'll gather whatever c-crop we need on our fish farms and rid ourselves forever of c-catch failures."

Shchetinin spoke a good deal more about the fish farms, then asked Bugrov: "You have two kolkhozes in the stanitsa?"

"Yes, farming and fishing."

"And how do you get along together? Do you quarrel?"

Bugrov shot a glance at the driver and said vaguely: "Well, it all depends."

"But do you?" Shchetinin insisted.

"Well, you see, Comrade Professor, this is a serious business," Bugrov said thoughtfully. "There's no clear line between our kolkhozes. The villagers live together,

all mixed up. We have farmers living among fishermen, and fishermen's homes among the farm-yards. That accounts for some folks shunting back and forth from one kolkhoz to another. If a man doesn't like it at the fishery, he comes over to us, and the other way round. And then you have families in the stanitsa where the husband, say, works in the fishers' kolkhoz and his wife works at our place as swine-girl or calf-girl."

"Do you approve of it?" Nazarov asked, winking at Shchetinin.

"I can't say I do," the farm chairman said gloomily. "I don't see any sense in it. A family like that lives at sixes and sevens and can't have the kolkhoz interests at heart. They can't have any heart for the job, it's just meat and drink to them."

"Yes," Shchetinin murmured, "I understand. But I think you'll hit it off with the f-fishermen—you'll soon be having common interests."

Nazarov and Bugrov glanced at Shchetinin with curiosity and waited for him to go on, but he lapsed into silence.

"How's it with the beluga, Ilya Afanasievich?" Nazarov inquired. "Did you get to the bottom of it?"

"I think so," Shchetinin said reluctantly. "I believe it was all the fault of the noose."

"The noose?"

"Yes. The s-stiff cord injured the fish. I've been trying to think of some way out."

He looked at Nazarov and smiled. "If it were p-possible I'd carry that b-beluga over the dam in my arms so's not to hurt it. But, alas!—the b-beluga is a big armful, and I'm old and feeble. Still, I'll find a way of riding the fish of that accursed noose."

"How?"

"My idea is to make a soft bed for it—a b-big sack without a bottom to it. We'll guide the fish into it care-

fully, then tow it to the well-boat without giving it any shocks."

Nazarov listened to Shchetinin with pleasure. He liked Shchetinin's enthusiasm for his work, his devoted love of the river, and the fact that despite his age his energies and perseverance never flagged. "Our professor is a real game chap," Nazarov had told the farm chairman in a tone of respect. "He's the kind that will face a thing out and not be scared by difficulties." What appealed to Nazarov most was Shchetinin's restless questing spirit projected into the future. The old man seemed to be making up for all he had left undone, hastening to accomplish what he regarded as the chief object of his life. Not content with knowing what was and had been, he strove eagerly for a glimpse of what was to be.

"We'll do things that will stagger the world," Shchetinin said with a chuckle. "I'm thinking of working out a scheme for a single industrial process in farming and fishery. I want to link the land up with the water."

The old man slapped Nazarov on the knee and continued: "God, as you know, divided the water from the land, believing He was doing a g-good deed. But the fisherman and the farmer are c-closer to each other than some theorists believe, and with a little thought we'll get them working side by side."

After the trip to the field the Party Secretary, on Mosolov's invitation, went to see the newly organized fish-culture laboratory.

"Our Komsomol boys and girls have fixed up a regular scientific lab out there," Mosolov said. "Soon we'll be letting our baby fishes out into the river."

The setting sun threw a flaming track across the river. Anisim, the buoy-keeper, descended the foot-path, carrying lanterns on his shoulders. Behind him came an

old woman in a black padded jacket carrying oars. Fishing-nets lay stretched out on the sand on the left bank. The muffled roar of the water at the dam could be heard in the stanitsa, and it sounded like the relentless pounding of the surf.

Nazarov sauntered along, with his thumbs hooked into his belt, looking at the clean-swept yards, the scarlet flowers in the flower-beds, and the arbours draped in wild vine.

"Your women are tidy," he said to Mosolov. "Keep their homes clean and neat."

"All our stanitsa women are like that," Mosolov said.

"So I see," Nazarov said, smiling. "Looking at your stanitsa, I've often wondered why the yards are so clean, with sweet flowers, while the streets are overgrown with burs. You'll soon have wolves howling among the weeds. That set me thinking what a poor job the stanitsa fathers are making of their duties. Don't you think the streets need looking after just as well as your private yards?"

"I daresay they do," Mosolov concurred dejectedly.

They walked down a path running through the vineyard and came to the little barn. When Nazarov saw its reed-thatched roof, its wattled door, and the wood-barred window, he looked round with a puzzled air.

"Where's your scientific lab?" he said. "D'you mean to say it's this?"

"Yes, Tikhon Filippovich."

"This cow-shed?" Nazarov said, surprised.

Mosolov looked extremely disconcerted. "It's the best we could do, we haven't got any other premises just now."

The Secretary's eyes narrowed. "Have you got a conscience, Comrade Mosolov? People have started a new useful job for the kolkhoz, a regular production

unit, and you go and put them into a shed! You're doing a mighty lot to help your innowators, aren't you?"

He dismissed Mosolov's explanations with a gesture of annoyance. "Don't make excuses. Come along. We'll discuss it afterwards."

In the barn were Grunya, Tosya, and Vitya Sazonov. The girls were bending over the apparatus with tweezers, extracting fungus-touched eggs, while Vitya was busy with a small school microscope.

Nazarov greeted them and went up to Vitya. "Well, Professor, tell us about your observations. What are you doing?"

"I'm studying the plankton of Swan Lake," Vitya said, without turning a hair.

"I see. And what is plankton?"

Vitya gave the Secretary a suspicious look. "Why, don't you know? Plankton are tiny plants and animals living in the water. Fishes feed on them. So we're studying the food resources of Swan Lake—investigating the plankton and the fish-stomachs."

"And what are your findings?" Nazarov continued in the same grave tone. "Will this plankton of yours be enough to feed the fish?"

Vitya glanced at Grunya out of the tail of his eye and said importantly: "Depends what fish. I've found dozens of species already in Swan Lake. Look at this book. It's all written down here, with drawings, too. Did the drawings myself. There. All kinds of crawfish and water-weeds. They've all got scientific names, but who can remember them!"

Vitya warmed to his subject. "Plankton's nothing!" he said, giving his lips a scornful twist. "We're studying the gas and salt conditions of the lake, we've measured the transparency of the water, and I've even examined the benthos."

He anticipated a possible question with an indulgent

smile. "D'you know what benthos is? It's the population at the bottom of the water. Worms, wrigglers, and what not. We have a lake here called Silt Lake—well, it's chock-full of this benthos. I'll show you a jar of it if you like."

Grunya frowned and checked the effusion. "All right, Vitya. That'll do!"

Nazarov went over to the girls, touched the apparatuses, and examined the spawn.

"Whose idea is this?" he said.

"Our inspector's," Grunya said with a faint blush. "Comrade Zubov is in charge of this work."

"Where is he?"

"On the river. He should be back soon."

The Secretary said reflectively: "Your chairman told me you were going to start cross-breeding experiments. Is that possible?"

Grunya hesitated before answering. "It is. I'm afraid I can't explain it properly. There are natural hybrids among the sturgeon, carp, and gwyniad orders. In the North they are artificially crossing river flat-fish with sea-plaice. That means man can breed valuable food-fishes himself. The way Michurin raised new kinds of fruits. It's terribly important for the future fish husbandry. We want to start such experiments, too."

"What do you need for it?"

"We need suitable conditions, quite a lot of equipment and instruments, premises, the help of scientists."

Nazarov winked to Mosolov. "My word! And I dare say your chairman will tell you that was not the way Michurin started. Michurin, he'll say, started on a patch of wasteland without any expert advice. Go on, Comrade Mosolov, console them, tell them they can carry on in a barn to begin with."

Tosya eyed the Secretary calmly and said with dignity: "Michurin started his experiments in the old days,

but we're working in Soviet society, in a kolkhoz. It makes all the difference."

"Hear that, Chairman?" Nazarov said, touching Mosolov's shoulder. "Do you twig? You'll have to help these folks. This is a serious job they're tackling. You can't shake them off with an old barn."

He left with Mosolov, and shaking his head, looked at the little barn again from the outside. "This won't do, Kuzma Fedorovich. Since the folks are keen on a hatchery and have started talking about it, you'll have to build one. Get me? You can run it up in a month—it isn't a steel mill or a blast-furnace. Call a meeting of the kolkhoz members, have a talk with the old fishermen, get the young folks interested. We'll see you are given the building materials, and a few things you can get on credit. I'll have a talk with Antropov. Let him call the Communists together and rally all the active people for the job."

In the evening Grunya met Vasili in the library and told him about the Secretary's visit.

"Would you believe it," she said in an excited whisper, drawing Vasili to the bench by the window, "Nazarov gave our Kuzma such a dressing-down, he didn't know which way to look. Vitya heard Nazarov telling him off outside. 'You've got to stop playing games and build a fish hatchery,' he says. 'Rally the young folks,' he says, 'get the Communists together....'"

"And what did Kuzma say?" Vasili asked with a chuckle.

"I don't know. He said nothing most of the time."

At a table, bent over a newspaper, sat Zakhar Bugrov. He had evidently overheard what Grunya said, for he smiled, smoothed down the newspaper sheet, and said: "Your Kuzma's not a bad fellow, but he's a bit slow on the uptake. His head works like a delayed-action bomb."

Outside the window, boys and girls could be seen dancing on an asphalted ring bordered by poplars. A violin and an accordion, screened by the trees, were softly playing a waltz tune. The faint sounds of the accordion seemed to be coming out of the starry depths of the night, but the violin, now wistful, now joyous, rose clear upon the air, and its vibrant strings gave almost human voice to the tale about the young accordion-player who roamed the dark village streets till morning, disturbing the sleep of pretty maidens with his tender song.

"They play well," Zubov said pensively.

"That's Yegor Ivanovich and Khudyakov," Bugrov said.

"Who's Yegor Ivanovich?"

Bugrov folded the newspaper and joined them by the window. "A young Cossack, one of our villagers. Wonderful musician. Just listen to his fiddle!"

Dancing couples floated past the window with a swish of leather soles on the smooth asphalt. The girls were in gay fluttering dresses, the fisher-lads in black jackets with shirts negligently open at the throat. The girls danced lightly, with a happy abandon, their bodies bent slightly backwards as though poised for flight. Their silk rustling skirts billowed out like so many brightly-coloured sails, and the strong arms of the boys drew them irresistibly into the thrilling vortex of the dance.

The violin sang on, and it seemed that any moment its song, light and pure, would tear itself away from the muffled basses of the accordion and soar like a brilliant happy bird over the star-mirroring river, over the dark streak of the riverside poplars, away into the grassy sweet-smelling steppe.

"Let's go and dance," whispered Grunya, pressing Vasil's hand.

They ran down the rickety steps of the wooden porch,

went round the house, and paused for a second before the noisy circle of young people. On the right, under an old apple-tree, Vasili saw the musicians. Stepan Khudyakov was sitting on a low stool, running his fingers over the keyboard of his instrument which lay on his knees. Next to him stood the fiddler. Vasili had a glimpse of his trim small figure in a khaki tunic, his cropped head with a dark forelock bent over the violin, and a neatly trimmed moustache above his tensely compressed lips.

"He plays wonderfully," Vasili thought.

He slipped his arm round Grunya's waist and led her into the circle. Hesitantly, at first, then ever more confidently and joyously, he swung her into the rhythm of the waltz.

"Lovely, isn't it?" he said, bringing his face close to the girl's cheek.

"Yes," Grunya's lips barely formed the reply.

At Zubov's request Maria woke him up at dawn. He snatched a hasty breakfast, threw his jacket over his shoulders, and crossed to the island over the rickety little bridge.

The sun had just risen, and in the dense woods splashes of brilliant colour glowed on the trunks of the old willows. Here, on the forest path, Vasili suddenly became aware of an odd closeness in the air. Not a leaf stirred on the trees and underbrush; the green reeds stood motionless under the steep bank; and the white down from the poplars floated on the glassy surface of the river. The well-warmed earth had not had time to cool overnight and gave off a dry bitterish warmth.

The path approached the river-bank at a spit of headland overgrown with osiers. Puddles touched with green duckweed gleamed on the dark sodden sand. A

white egret rose lazily from the sandy bank. It flew over the sleepy river with a slow flap of its pinkish wings and disappeared beyond the woods.

Vasili crossed a gully and came out on to a high bluff which commanded an excellent view of the confluence of the two rivers—a great sheet of water through which lay the spring and summer routes of the running fish. Vasili decided to rest a bit and then look about for a convenient spot where an observation post for the under-inspector could be established. He walked leisurely along the bank, peering into the limpid water, and at a bend in the river saw some wreckage lying in the water.

He stopped to look at it.

It was the chassis of a lorry lying on its side on the sandy bottom. Evidently the water had long since destroyed all the wooden parts, and all that remained of the lorry was its frame with the wheel disks and the dented driver's cab. Tangles of emerald-green water-weeds swayed gently in the oval apertures of the disks, and white shells clustered on the brown rusty metal.

Zubov stood for a long time on the steep bank, peering into the water and watching the movements of the fish shoals around the wreck, which lay half-buried in the river sand. Rudds were weaving in and out of the metal labyrinth; brisk little shoals of roaches flitted about; a young pike swam up several times from the lower depths, cleaving the current; avoiding the sunbeams glimmering on the river bottom, it floated into the greenish shadow of the disks and lay in wait with a faint stir of its stiff fins; as soon as some emboldened roach came near the disk, the pike shot out of its hiding-place like a torpedo, its jaws wide open, and swallowed the gaping little fish.

Zubov sat down on the exposed roots of a willow and bent over the river, shading his eyes from the sun.

"Admiring the fishes?" he heard an unfamiliar voice.

Before him stood Yegor Ivanovich, the fiddler. He wore a faded soldier's suit and canvas sports shoes, and was carrying an old-fashioned shot-gun. On his back dangled a knapsack through the torn pockets of which there protruded the wings and tails of pine-finches, hawks, and shrikes wrapped in paper.

"Admiring the fishes?" Yegor Ivanovich repeated, sweeping off his cap and wiping his perspiring forehead. "And I've been gathering material for the evening."

"Material?"

Yegor Ivanovich carefully deposited his well-worn knapsack in the shade.

"Shooting birds," he said, sitting down beside Zubov. "I'm a taxidermist. I stuff birds and animals for the visual-aids factory. I get a shooting order every month. The kiddies at school study wild life from my dummies."

He stretched his legs with a sigh and turned to Zubov. "You're admiring the fishes? This is their favourite spot. Plenty of elbow-room. The current carries down all kinds of fish-food—worms, beach-fleas, all kinds of grass—and it all washes up against the lorry. Something like a fish-feed depot."

Yegor Ivanovich, his brown eyes lighting up with animation, began to speak about fishes, then he went on to birds, and moved up closer to Vasili.

"You've got to study every living creature in its natural conditions," he said gravely. "You've got to know where it lives, what it lives on, and how it breeds. You won't get to know it properly unless you do." He laughed, revealing big tobacco-stained teeth.

"That's what I'm always telling them at the factory. They got together a bunch of girls there to make dummies, but the girls know as much about the job as a stick of wood. The hunters bring them, say, a hundred skins of the marsh hawk or white-eyed pochard. Those girls

have never seen a marsh hawk or a pochard even in the cinema. They give the dummies poses according to picture plates and then stick them up on the shelves like so many tea-pots—makes you sick to look at them. Now why does that happen? It happens because folk don't have the proper knowledge."

Listening to Yegor Ivanovich, Vasili thought of his own duties as fishery inspector. Although he had studied well at college, he still had a lot to learn, and would have to study the fish here, on the river, and not merely from books and skeletons.

"You're quite right," Vasili said. "To be able to have your own way with Nature you have to know a lot."

Yegor Ivanovich cocked his head at the sound of a jerky whistle among the bushes, then smiled and touched Zubov's shoulder.

"You just watch. That's a kingfisher calling. He's a useful helper to us, you know. He's not much bigger than a thimble, but he's a wonderful air scout. You can tell by his flight where there's a school of fish fry. He'll sit somewhere on a willow and whistle to his lady, sort of telling her: I'm going out to do some hunting, shan't be long...."

He broke off. "Sh-sh... there he is!"

A tiny kingfisher, like a blue star, flew out of the riverside bushes. He wheeled sharply over the spot where the wrecked lorry lay and hung poised over it, his little wings beating the air. The ball of brilliant plumage hung over the river for a long time as if suspended on an invisible thread of sunshine, and every little rainbow-tinted feather was reflected in the placid mirror-like water.

Suddenly he swooped into the water and flew out again in a flash with a silvery little fish in his strong black beak. Paying no heed to the men sitting under the willow, the kingfisher alighted on one of its branches,

and dancing about on his thin legs with the fish's tail in his beak, stunned it by striking its head against the trunk of the willow. Then he laid the fish down beside him, shook himself, spat out a tiny fountain of water, preened his feathers, and started whistling gaily.

"See that?" Yegor Ivanovich whispered. "He's calling his missus, telling her: all's well, I'm coming home."

The kingfisher snatched up the fish and flew low over the river, disappearing among the bushes.

"There," said Yegor Ivanovich, "I daresay you saw that little devil only on ladies' hats, but he can be a great help to you. And he's not the only one."

While they lay talking on the bank, a dark cloud stole up from the west. It spread, overlaying the whole horizon, from the woods on the left bank to the distant hills, and crept slowly over the valley.

"Looks like rain," Zubov said. "We'd better be going."

Yegor Ivanovich drew the air in slowly through dilated nostrils and reached for his knapsack.

"More like a thunder-storm, I should say," he chuckled. "And some storm it's going to be, let me tell you."

"Then let's hurry," Vasili said anxiously. "I have to drop in at Pear Orchard."

They ran down the steep bank, past the riverside thickets, and across the flood meadow. The hot noonday sun still shone brightly behind their backs, but the heavy cloud creeping up from downstream had already thrown its gigantic shadow across the steppe. Lighted by the sunbeams, the stanitsa houses with their white roofs, and the steamboats by the lock with barges in tow, stood out sharply against the dark yellowish cloud.

In a few minutes the clouds eclipsed the sun. The day grew dark. The rooks raised a commotion over the poplars. On the right, from behind the wormwood shrubs by the roadside, a covey of partridges flew out. They spread

fanwise in the air, flew across a dried creek, and were lost in the willow thickets.

People were moving across the flood meadow from all sides, making for Pear Orchard. Two girls, calling out loudly to each other, drove a herd of mottled calves towards the black-thorn bushes amid a tinkling of cow-bells. Women ran down the country lane with spades, buckets, and hoes. A young herdsman on a lean stallion cantered down the weedy headland of the field cracking his whip.

"There's shelter at the orchard," Yegor Ivanovich explained. "The stanitsa gardeners used to live there in the old days, and some of the buildings are still standing. That's why everyone's hurrying there."

Zubov quickened his pace. Lightning flashed blue overhead, then came the first clap of thunder. The sinister yellow turmoil of clouds swirling over the earth crept closer with every second. In the west, beyond the river bend, a whitish pall of rain rose in the air. There was a sharp tang of moisture. A gust of wind caught up withered clumps of tumble-weed lying in the roadway, whirled them into the air, and drove them madly towards the river amid a pillar of dust.

"We're in for it!" Vasili shouted.

"That's all right, we're not made of butter!" cried Yegor Ivanovich, who was running along behind.

They had almost reached the orchard when everything around was suddenly lit up by a blinding white light, and a terrific crash of thunder seemed to rend the sky in two. Drops of rain spattered the dust, falling heavier and faster, and then the rain-cloud burst in an irresistible, warm downpour.

By the time Zubov and Yegor Ivanovich reached a half-ruined brick shed they were drenched to the skin.

They dashed into the shed. People were already sitting and standing there—cowherds, farm-women, fishermen, and gardeners. Most of them were huddled in a

corner under a piece of roofing, talking among themselves in low tones.

Zubov immediately espied Grunya among the farm-women. She was sitting barefoot beside a wizened little old woman, gay and animated, in a wet dress, wringing out her kerchief and wiping her face, neck, and arms with it.

Catching sight of Vasili, she smiled and cried out: "Aha! You've got wet, too!"

She threw the kerchief over her outstretched legs and called to Vasili: "Come over here, there's room!"

Carefully shaking the water from his cap, Vasili went up closer and squatted down. The sharp-nosed old woman glanced at him curiously, gnawing her thin lips; then she nudged Grunya and asked unceremoniously: "Who's he? One of our villagers or a new-comer?"

"He's a new-comer, Kuprianovna," Grunya said with amusement. "The inspector, who's working here in place of Stepan Ivanovich."

Kuprianovna nodded understandingly. "Ah, I've heard about him. People say he's hatching fishes like they was chickens."

The storm raged unabated. Turbid torrents ran hissing down the green hill-sides. Rain-drops danced in the hollows and puddles, raising frothy bubbles. The men sitting in the doorway talked in low tones about the haymaking and the fish catches downstream, while the women combed their wet hair, wrung out their skirts, and gossiped.

From the corner in which Grunya and Vasili sat, through a mist of rain one could see three century-old pear-trees. With dark trunks and gnarled branches they stood on the hill-top like three giants, their huge crowns entwined as though clasped in an eternal embrace. Judging by the charred hollows yawning darkly on their trunks, the marks of axes on the rough moss-grown bark, and the lopped off branches sticking out among the luxuriant

crowns, these trees had been struck by lightning, cut by the axe, and buffeted by the winds many a time during their hundred years of life. Yet even now, on this stormy day, they stood as though enchanted—strong, green, and virile.

Kuprianovna, blinking her old failing eyes, peered at the trees through a gap in the wall, her shrivelled toil-worn hands folded in her lap.

"They stand there as if time don't mean anything to them," she said, addressing no one in particular. "Yet how many years have gone by! It's all the work of human hands, mind you. Men planted them, men tended them. First grandfather, then son, then grandson. Just think of all the work which has gone into them!"

She glanced at the window and her dark face brightened up. "There's my work in it, too. Ah, what work! When I die, you, my dears, will eat the sweet fruit and think of old grannie who tended the orchard."

Vasili felt his heart overflowing with a poignant sense of happiness. This thunder-storm, the smells of water and earth, Yegor Ivanovich in his canvas-topped shoes, the age-old trees in the orchard, the small fishes, the brilliant kingfisher, and, above all, Grunya, bare-legged, laughing Grunya, strong as a sturdy young tree in the rain—all this had already become part of himself, part of that hard and joyous life which he had chosen for himself.

And he breathed the air deep into his lungs. Now smiling, now thoughtful, he gazed at Grunya, touching her wet hand, answering her absent-mindedly....

Meanwhile a fresh wind had sprung up from downstream and driven the clouds eastwards. The sun shone out over the river. A sparkling rainbow flung its immense arc across the sky, from the steppes over the river to the blue Donets hills. Outside, loud and resonant, like a silver trumpet, a mare neighed to her foal. A turtle-dove

cooed on the pear-tree. Two red calves, ludicrously kicking up their hoofs on the slippery path, scampered towards the black-thorn bushes.

The men and women came out of the shed.

"Lord, how beautiful it is!" Kuprianovna exclaimed.

Grunya ran out after her, her shoes in her hands. Holding up her skirt she ran through the puddles bare-legged, splashing the water around her. Yegor Ivanovich followed her in his squelching canvas shoes. Vasili, without further ado, pulled off his top-boots, tucked up his trousers, and strode down the road in Grunya's wake.

They went along chatting gaily, greedily drinking in the pungent odour of the grasses; and all the earth around them, rain-washed, green, and young, was spangled with myriads of golden drops.

At the edge of the stanitsa they came upon Arkhip Antropov.

"Just the man I want!" Antropov called to Zubov. "There's going to be a Party meeting in the fishing kolkhoz to-morrow. I want you to tell the Communists about the kolkhoz's fish-culture measures." He smiled good-humouredly and added: "Here's your chance to raise the question of the fish hatchery."

"All right," Zubov said. "I'll have a try."

Vasili had little time to prepare his speech, but the thing had to be done. The thought that Shchetinin and the Secretary of the D.P.C. would be at the meeting made Vasili feel rather nervous. He believed that many people, including Mosolov, would oppose the building of a hatchery and thus thwart all the plans of the young people.

However, no one raised any objections. Vasili spoke for over an hour and was listened to with rapt interest.

He began his speech by touching on a subject he had already mentioned at a previous meeting. He told the fishermen how, in the old days, there had arisen the

noxious theory claiming that the fish stocks were inexhaustible, and how low in-shore and subsequently off-shore fishing had fallen in Europe and America during the last century.

"Is the world supply of fish being exhausted?" Vasili posed the question and answered it: "Yes, it is. Some time ago an English scientist calculated the weight of fish caught in England per unit of tackle, and was horrified by the results. Only recently it amounted to about three hundredweights and now it is no more than a third of a hundredweight. Nine times less! And that in the course of a couple of decades!

"Certain bourgeois scientists," Vasili continued, "hold that the world's population is increasing much faster than the means of subsistence, and therefore, they allege, the world's food supplies are running low. That's not true. Supplies are running short not because the world is over-populated, but because capitalism depletes and ravages the land. Cutthroat competition among the bourgeois countries has turned fishing into sheer piracy. They catch fish day and night, at all times of the year, and by every conceivable means—otter-trawls, long-lines, drift-nets, and purse-seines; they exterminate the under-sized young fishes without restriction and infest all the rivers and seas, destroying every living thing in the water like a swarm of locusts...."

Vasili ran his hand through his hair, sipped some water from a glass which someone had pushed up to him, and went on:

"Our Soviet people run things differently. Living as we still do in a capitalist encirclement, we can't change fishing conditions on the seas, which are demarcated, but in our own inland waters we must look on fishing as a part of the socialist national economy. Here there's nothing to prevent us from increasing our fish stocks year by year in the interests of the country. To do that every

fishing kolkhoz must learn to run its business on new lines. We shall assist Nature by breeding and rearing fish, we shall increase the fish's food supply and create new varieties of valuable food-fishes."

Vasili then spoke about the plans for building a fish hatchery, and wound up briefly: "I think we're all prepared to start laying the foundations as quickly as possible, so that we can have the building of the fish hatchery ready by the autumn and start planned work next spring."

Antropov, Grunya, Stepan, Tosya, and a number of young fishermen declared that they fully supported Zubov's proposal and were ready to start work at once.

Mosolov supported it too. He declared that the kolkhoz had available funds and the general meeting of the kolkhoz members would undoubtedly approve the project.

Pimen Talalayev sat at the back, as usual, saying nothing, but towards the end of the meeting he took the floor.

"It's quite right, of course," he said gloomily, staring down at his feet. "You've got to run things on the river sensibly. But, come to mention it, how's this going to affect the fishermen's earnings? I mean to say, we'll work overtime on the hatchery when the fishing's done, but how about our kids—who's going to feed them? Who's going to pay us for this overtime job? It's all very well, interests of science, blazing new trails, and all that...."

The last to speak was Nazarov, the Secretary of the D.P.C. He did not go up to the platform, but spoke from his seat among the fishermen in a quiet voice, as if addressing an informal gathering.

"Things on the river are in a bad way," he said. "The landings are steadily dropping. Isn't that so? And who's to blame? We're all to blame—first and foremost we, the district leadership. We've got used to looking on

fish as something of secondary importance and go in chiefly for farming."

His eyes travelled over the hall with a keen penetrating look.

"I haven't been working long in this district, yet I'm partly to blame too. We haven't tackled fish husbandry seriously, and it's high time we did. For years you've had crooks running the show here, men like Likhachov who made free with the river and did what they liked. The trouble's not in Likhachov alone—he's gone now. The trouble lies elsewhere—in our failure to grasp the tasks which now confront the fishing industry, in our inability to foresee what the morrow has in store for the river. But Likhachov has left poisoned roots behind him. We must tear those roots up and get down to work in true Bolshevik style."

Nazarov glanced at Pimen with an amused smile, then resumed:

"Someone here spoke about letting the scientists go in for research while he stood aside. New trails in science are sometimes blazed not by well-known scientists but by ordinary men and women, practical workers and innovators. That's a thing we shouldn't forget. We'll build the hatchery and we're going to run things on the river in a new way that will guarantee us high yields, the same as on our farms."

That evening the Golubovskaya Communists unanimously adopted a resolution to proceed at once with the building of a fish hatchery.

4

Pimen Talalayev had been nursing a grudge against Zubov ever since the inspector had confiscated the second team's catch. Although Talalayev did not dare to come out openly against the inspector, he endeavoured

by underhand means to stir up ill feeling against Vasili among the fishermen.

"Just a nobody. An inspector like that isn't worth a kopek on a market day," he would say with contempt. "He doesn't know a thing about fishes, doesn't care a hang for the fishermen, and looks down on the kolkhoz—ah, let them fiddle about, it's none of my business."

If any fisherman tried to argue with him, Pimen Talalayev would glare at him and say: "A fat lot you understand! You haven't got his measure yet. But I see straight through him. A measly fellow. Not the kind of man we need here."

After a gloomy pause, he would wind up significantly: "With an inspector like that our kolkhoz will soon be on the rocks. That Zubov's a real bureaucrat. He doesn't do the state any good and doesn't give our teams a chance."

Vasili often visited the second team and had heart-to-heart talks with the fishermen. He noticed that the young fishermen regarded him with sympathy, while the team-leader met him with surly silence or sneers.

After the affair of the confiscated catch, the second team lost the lead and dropped to the bottom of the list. This told on the men's earnings, and Talalayev decided to work on their feelings and turn them against Zubov.

"We'll always be at the tail-end with that bureaucrat," he said to the fishermen. "He'll sit on our necks now and check every one of our landings. You'd better forget about bonuses now—the inspector fellow will see that you don't get them."

The fishermen listened silently to their team-leader, neither arguing with him, nor expressing approval. Pimen therefore thought it wiser not to rub it in. He unburdened his heart only to his brother Avdei, the old ferryman.

One day, after listening to his brother, the ferryman decided to help him get rid of the hateful inspector. "What you ought to do, Pimen, is to pin something on him," Avdei said after some reflection.

"That's easier said than done," Pimen snorted. "How the devil are you going to trip him up?"

They were sitting at the kitchen-table by the light of an oil-lamp. There was no one else in the room, and the brothers could speak without fear of being overheard. Avdei stroked the smoothly polished board of the table with his rough hand and squinted his dim-sighted eyes.

"Don't throw in your hand, Pimen. You must be getting old, losing your grip. You can't afford to do that. You're a man without a stain, Pimen, your record's clean. What are you afraid of? You could floor a stronger man than Zubov if he crossed your path."

Pimen pulled a wry face. "You're talking through your hat, Avdei. Zubov's a Communist, and if anything happens, the Party Committee will stand up for him and twist my head off."

"Only fools get their heads twisted off," the ferryman said imperturbably. "And you're no fool. Every job has to be handled delicate-like, on the quiet, the way Dad used to teach us."

Avdei turned up the crackling wick of the lamp and brought his pink, bland face closer up to his brother's, tickling Pimen's cheek with his white little beard.

"You say Zubov's a Party man, eh?" he said thoughtfully.

"Don't you know he is?"

"All the better then," the ferryman said with a chuckle. "They don't like bribe-takers in the Party—kick them out in a jiffy."

"What bribe-takers?" Pimen said blankly.

"The ordinary kind," the ferryman sniggered, "those that take bribes from people."

"But where does Zubov come in?"

"That's just it, Pimen, he's got to be made to come in," Avdei said, stroking his beard. "If a man stands in your way the only thing to do is to knock him off his perch, tell on him. Only it's got to be a neat job, everything watertight, you know."

Pimen stared at his brother and burst out laughing. "You're a devil, Avdei," he boomed. "But who's going to be fool enough to believe me if I trump up a charge against Zubov? You think it's easy—hey presto! and the trick is done!"

The smile vanished from the ferryman's bland face. "Don't be a fool, Pimen," he said sternly. "Listen to what I tell you. That fellow Zubov's got everyone's goat here, and the time's just about ripe for getting rid of him. Be your age. People are looking to you to do something, and you're playing the fool. Don't I know that you and the under-inspector brought Zubov some fish and he took it? That's your first hook. Have a talk with your boys and report to the proper quarters."

"Until that louse came here," Avdei went on in his snuffling, peevish voice, "the river fed us all and gave us a living. Everyone had fish if he wasn't too lazy to take it, and money as well. Nowadays you daren't show your nose on the river, you'll get nabbed right away. You heard what he did to Yegor, didn't you?"

The brothers talked till midnight and agreed that Zubov had to be removed from the stanitsa by hook or by crook. Pimen promised Avdei that he would tackle the inspector within the next few days and swore that he would "dig up plenty of dirt" and write to the fishery authorities.

An incident involving Under-Inspector Prokhorov played into Talalayev's hands. It occurred on the Donets, near the sunken lorry, at the very spot which Zubov had chosen as a convenient observation post for his assistant.

Prokhorov was preparing to go out for night duty when he suddenly felt unwell. His back and limbs ached and he felt dizzy. His first impulse was not to go. "I'll stay at home," he thought, but he dismissed the idea, and merely told his daughter: "I feel rather out of sorts, Grunya."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Kind of all-overish."

"Hadn't you better stay at home then?"

"No, I'll go," Prokhorov said. "The post is a long way off and the river's teeming with fish just now—some poacher may shoot a net and there'll be the devil to pay afterwards...."

Groaning, he pulled on his boots, put on his coat and cap, thrust a lump of bread and a dried fish into his pocket, took his carbine, and trudged off to his post. While he was going through the woods it grew quite dark. A cool wind blew from the river, and Prokhorov began to shiver. He turned up his collar, buttoned his coat, and walked faster.

Coming out on to the steep bank of the Donets, Prokhorov paced up and down; then he shuffled about on one spot, peering at the sheet of water and the shallows at the bend. It was quiet. The dark river murmured softly, and now and then a frisking fish splashed in the water. From the direction of the dam, which was hidden by the woods, came the muffled roar of the water.

"No one will poke his nose here," Prokhorov thought.

Noticing a hay-rick nearby, he shuffled up to it, and seated himself comfortably. "I'll sit here a bit and warm myself up," he thought, "and then take another stroll along the bank." But drowsiness began to steal over him. He spread some of the dry hay under him, lay down, and began to doze. Soon he was fast asleep.

Prokhorov heard nothing when a fishing-boat came up from the direction of Bream Island and two figures

in dark rain-coats started fishing with a cast-net. They went about their business without interference, sweeping the river from bank to bank and landing about a hundredweight of fish at every haul.

Meanwhile, two members of the public inspectorate, Pimen Talalayev and Grandpa Shrimp, were making their night round of Upper Zamanukha. They walked in silence, smoking cigarettes, and when they reached the sandy spit at the Donets, Pimen thought he caught the sound of creaking oars somewhere close at hand.

"Wait a minute, Grandpa," Pimen said. "Sounds like someone fishing."

"Nothing of the sort," Shrimp said. "Probably just the wind in the branches, or——"

"Wind be damned!" Pimen interrupted him testily. "It's rowlocks."

He took his cap off and strained his ears.

"Prokhorov's doing duty at the Donets," Shrimp said. "I saw him going out."

"So what?" Pimen snapped. "Maybe he's fishing himself, that Prokhorov of yours."

"What do you mean?"

"What I say!"

Pimen scratched his head, then he beckoned with a decisive wave of his hand. "Come along, Grandpa. My brother's boat is moored here somewhere in the thickets. I've got the key. It's a light boat and we'll take them by surprise."

They went down to the water's edge. Pimen unlocked the padlock on the chain, brought a pair of oars out of the bushes, told Shrimp to take the rudder, then pushed off and jumped into the boat.

"Here goes!"

They rounded the sandy spit and rowed out into the middle of the stream. After twenty minutes' search they boat-hooked a wherry which lay hidden under the steep

bank in the shade of the poplar-trees. The boat was full of fish. Nearby, on the bank, sat two figures in rain-coats—a man and a woman.

“Hi, come on out of there!” Pimen roared. “Who are you smarties?”

Pimen struck a match, in the light of which he recognized the cook of the dredge-boat which had been working off Bream Island for the last three days. The cook used to come to the stanitsa for milk, and Talalayev immediately remembered his fat bloated face.

“Who’s the woman with you?” he demanded.

“My wife,” the cook growled.

“I see,” Talalayev drawled importantly. “Well, we’ll have to write up a report against you.”

Pimen, in the light of a torch, swiftly wrote out a statement, made the cook, his wife, and Grandpa Shrimp sign it, and signed it himself.

“Clear out now,” he said with an indulgent nod. “The chiefs will decide what to do with you. Call for your boat at the curing-shop to-morrow—ask for Comrade Golovnev.”

Pimen took the boat in tow, brought it to the other bank, and following the retreating figure of the cook with his eyes, said to Grandpa Shrimp: “Let’s go and find our sentry. Must be snoring somewhere in the bushes.”

He searched the bank, discovered the hay-rick with the under-inspector asleep in it, and waved his hand to Grandpa Shrimp.

“Come and have a look. Here’s your Prokhorov. Snoring like a trumpet!”

The old man bent down to wake Prokhorov, but Talalayev checked him. “Leave him alone, the man’s fagged out.”

Pimen drew Grandpa Shrimp away, got into the boat, and said: “Come along. We’ll run the boat down to the jetty and hand the fish over to Golovnev.”

"Don't you think we ought to let the inspector know about this?" Shrimp said.

"Why, yes, if you want him to make mincemeat out of your Prokhorov to-morrow," Pimen said with a sly cackle.

"Why?" the old man said blankly.

"For going to sleep at his post and not taking care of socialist property."

The good-natured old man looked at Talalayev with respect and thought: "He's a kind-hearted old dog, doesn't want to get Prokhorov into trouble."

Pimen, meanwhile, was gloating inwardly. "Well, Comrade Zubov, you're in for it now. You treated Prokhorov kindly because of Grunya. Family favouritism, eh? I'll show you what's what!"

Not waiting for day to break, Pimen made Grandpa Shrimp keep watch over the boat at the jetty while he went to the stanitsa, roused Golovnev, and asked him to receive the confiscated fish.

"Does the inspector know about this?" Golovnev said, yawning.

"Sure he does, Mikhail Stepanovich," Pimen assured him.

Golovnev sent a cart down for the fish, had it weighed, and started to write out a receipt.

"Make it out in my name," Pimen said. "So much fish confiscated from the poachers and delivered by Talalayev of the public inspectorate."

"Yes, of course," Golovnev agreed. "You've delivered it, so the receipt will be in your name."

"Make the rubber stamp clear and don't forget the date," Pimen reminded him.

"Don't you worry, I'll do it in proper form."

At home Pimen carefully examined the report and the receipt, smoothed the papers out, then licked a pencil

with his tongue and wrote in the following lines: "Under-Inspector I. N. Prokhorov was found sleeping under a hay-rick, and the poaching was done at his post while he was on duty." These lines were written in above the signatures.

"That's that, Comrade Inspector," Pimen muttered, looking out of the window. "The blow's aimed at your father-in-law, but it's your head it will hit."

Pimen Talalayev did not say a word to anyone about what had happened on the Donets. Shrimp kept silent, too, for fear of getting Prokhorov into trouble. As for Prokhorov, he had slept under the rick till daybreak, and knew nothing about the night's occurrence. Golovnev, thinking that Vasili had sent the confiscated fish down to the curing-shop, did not broach the subject with him, and two days later returned the cook his boat on Pimen's note.

"Well, Avdei," Pimen told his brother, "I think the trick's going to work. The thing now's to think over carefully how to word it."

And he sat down to write a report to the Fisheries Trust without mentioning the poaching incident and Prokhorov's remissness, which he decided to keep up his sleeve as a trump card.

Zubov, meanwhile, had no suspicion of the storm-cloud that was gathering over his head. He made the daily round of his area, checked the fish takings at Talovaya, worked in the laboratory, and in the evenings visited Grunya and went for walks with her about the stanitsa. Everyone saw this and found nothing reprehensible in the fact that the inspector went out with his assistant's daughter. They were both young and free and no one could forbid them falling in love with each other.

Prokhorov saw this, too, and although he did not like it, he was too timid by nature to interfere in his daugh-

ter's affairs. Only once, when Vasili and Grunya had sat too long in the garden, did he hazard a discreet remark.

"You ought to go easy with him, Grunya."

"Why?" Grunya was on her guard in an instant.

"Oh, nothing particular," her father said with a sigh.

"You're both young, maybe there's nothing wrong in it, but you know what people are—they'll start gossiping."

"Let them gossip," Grunya's voice came out of the darkness. "We're not doing anything wrong."

Prokhorov never broached the subject again, considering that Grunya was old enough to look after herself.

Marfa Sazonova rallied her lodger about his affair with Grunya. "Isn't it time to send the match-makers down, Vasya?" she said archly.

"What match-makers?" Vasili grinned. "I have no intention of marrying yet."

"What do you mean? The girl's all wrapped up in you. How can you be so heartless!"

Marfa had often told Vasili about her own marriage, and he knew that she had not loved her late husband; she had left him several times and gone to live with her parents in the hamlet, and returned home again only upon the insistence and pleading of her mother.

In the evenings, over supper, Vasili would turn the conversation to fish-breeding, and Marfa would listen avidly to his stories about the development of the spawn, the life of the young fishes, and the feeding of sea and river fish. Once Zubov found Marfa sitting at the table engrossed in Berg's thick book *The Fishes of Russia*.

Vasili's sudden appearance threw her into confusion and she shut the book quickly. "Your talk has put me on to this," she said with a shy smile. "I ought to be kneading the dough instead of looking at pictures."

"Never mind, it's useful," Vasili laughed. "Only you've chosen a difficult book. I'll give you something easier."

As time went on, Marfa entered more and more into the interests of her lodger. This was in no little measure stimulated by Vitya, who initiated his mother into the mysteries of his biological researches and kept urging her to pay a visit to the laboratory. Marfa understood that Vitya owed his interest in science to Vasili's influence, and she felt grateful to her lodger, whom she had grown to love as an elder son. At the fish-breeding laboratory Marfa examined the apparatuses with childish curiosity; and Vitya proudly led her up to the microscope and let her examine the plankton. Grunya and Tosya showed her the larvae of a carp, in which the tiny, pigmented eye-dots were already clearly visible.

"Isn't it wonderful what science can do!" Marfa cried. "It's like looking through a spy-glass!"

After Marfa's visit to the fish-breeding laboratory, Vasili advanced still further in her estimation. She treated him with affectionate care and stood up for him wherever she could. She was the first to learn that Pimen Talalayev was trying to get his fishermen to send in a report about Vasili, and that one of the men had been induced to sign the paper which his team-leader had drawn up. No one could tell her what the paper was about, but everyone she met said that Zubov would bark his shins.

This is how matters stood. After a talk with his brother, Pimen wrote a long report to the chief of the Fisheries Trust saying that Zubov was taking bribes from kolkhoz members (mention was made of the fish brought to Vasili on the day of his arrival). Furthermore, Talalayev reported that Zubov was "exacting unlawful dues from anglers." He also mentioned the confiscation of the fish caught by the poachers at Zamanukha, and accused the inspector of having appropriated some of this fish for himself and sold it at the market at an exorbitant price. Pimen wound up his report with the statement that Zu-

bov had sent a team of fishermen down to Talovaya during the spring close-time and made them catch hundreds of choice breams for him.

Vasili, who knew nothing of Talalayev's machinations, merely laughed when Marfa told him about it and said there was no pleasing everybody.

"Let him write if he wants to," he calmed Marfa's fears. "He can't scare me. They think they can lead me by the nose, but I see through them. I'll never wink at malpractices."

Arkhip Antropov, on the other hand, was seriously alarmed and indignant at Pimen's behaviour.

One evening, when the fishermen of both teams were tarring the nets ashore, Antropov decided to have the matter out with Pimen. Spreading out his padded jacket on the sand, he lay down next to an overturned boat and hailed Stepan Khudyakov who was passing by. "Call your team-leader here for a minute, will you!"

Antropov had a feeling that the coming talk boded no good, but he wanted to draw Pimen out and have a frank talk with him. The figure of the team-leader coming slowly towards him only strengthened his misgivings. Talalayev came lumbering up with his head lowered, his heavy boots treading deep in the sand, and his rubber rain-coat thrown over his arm and trailing behind him like the tail of a big fish.

Pimen stopped within a few paces of Antropov. "Did you call me?" he asked.

"I did."

"What's the matter?"

"I want to speak to you."

Pimen tossed his rain-coat on the sand and sat down on it without saying a word.

Both of them, Antropov and Talalayev, had been born and bred in Golubovskaya and had known each other since childhood. Both were old fishermen, but their lives

had gone different ways and they had therefore never become friends. During the years when Antropov had ranged the Don area with a Red Guard detachment, Pimen Talalayev had lain in hiding with his father-in-law at the Atamansky hamlet. When Antropov joined the fishing kolkhoz, he gave up his boat and fishing-gear, whereas Talalayev had sold everything, to the last pair of oars, before handing in his application for joining the kolkhoz. Antropov, working as team-leader, readily gave the young fishermen the benefit of his experience, while Pimen Talalayev stubbornly refused to share his "fishing secrets" with the men, saying mockingly: "Learn the ropes yourselves, you're all so smart these days." At the outbreak of the war Antropov had joined up at once and been wounded twice at the front, whereas Talalayev had volunteered to evacuate the subsidiary farm's cattle and had spent four years in Kazakhstan.

Although they had lived fifty years on the same street, Antropov and Talalayev seldom spoke to each other and there was no love lost between them.

"What d'you want?" Pimen said sullenly. "I'm busy, the men are waiting for me, and the pitch is boiling."

Talayev was getting irritated by Antropov's silence. But the latter, as if on purpose, took his time. He got his tobacco-pouch out with slow deliberation and rolled himself a cigarette, carefully collecting the spilt crumbs of tobacco and gazing out at the river.

"Don't be in a hurry," he said at length. "It's going to be a long talk."

He moved up closer and said, heavily enunciating his words: "Well, Pimen, what are you up to now?"

"What?" Pimen's eyebrows went up.

"You know what I mean."

"Haven't the faintest notion."

"How long are you going to ride that mangy goat of yours?"

"What goat?" Pimen said with a shrug.

"The one you've been fool enough to saddle and are driving to the brink."

"Drop the trimmings, let's have the story. I can't sit here all day."

"You'll have the story."

Antropov looked Pimen steadily in the face. "D'you intend to work in the kolkhoz?"

"What d'you think I'm doing, catching flies? Or maybe you think of firing me from the kolkhoz?"

"Now that, Pimen Talalayev, is just what I want to talk to you about," Antropov said sharply, "because you don't seem to be able to drop your ways. You've started to put your men up to no good. You don't expect to be patted on the back for that."

"What ways are you talking about?" Talalayev said with a sneer. "You needn't try to put the wind up me. What am I, a slacker, or a shirker?"

"You're worse, because the line you're trying to put across is spoiling the young fishers and causing harm to the kolkhoz."

"What are you driving at?" Talalayev asked with a scowl. "Are you trying to make out that I'm opposing the Soviet regime, or committing sabotage?"

"Don't act the simpleton or the saint," Antropov cut him short sternly. "As for opposing the Soviet regime—you haven't got the guts, nor is there any reason why you should oppose it. But as for the kolkhoz—you're doing it a lot of harm."

He laid his heavy sinewy hand on Talalayev's shoulder.

"What sort of life are you leading, man? Tell me, what have you in common with other Soviet people? You joined the kolkhoz because everyone else was joining it and you couldn't help yourself. You were thick with Likha-

chov and the pair of you shamelessly deceived the state. You didn't care what you took out of the river so long as you fulfilled your quota and got your pay. You're still the same man you were thirty years ago, Pimen Talalayev. You've hidden your soul away in a strong-box and locked it up. And now when the kolkhoz has to be set on a new path, you're only worrying about your own pocket and don't give a hang for the kolkhoz. We have a new man in place of your pal Likhachov and he's trying to do things the Soviet way, but you're out to get rid of him! Making up all kinds of nonsense about him and trying to work up the fishermen against the state's interests."

"It's a lie!" Talalayev flung in dourly.

"A lie?" Antropov said, breathing hard. "D'you think we're blind and deaf? We know all about you, we know every word you say—how you're always bringing up the old days and kicking against everything that's new. The rescue of the fish fry, river protection, the fish hatchery—all this sticks in your throat, Pimen, and you've begun to spoil the young fishermen with your talk."

Talalayev's jaws began to work spasmodically. He got up unhurriedly and shook the sand off his rain-coat. "You can't lay down the law to me, Arkhip," he said in a suppressed voice. "Teach your grandmother to suck eggs and mind your own business. I can look after myself."

Antropov got up too. "All right, Pimen," he said hoarsely, "go along, but don't forget this talk. I didn't start it for nothing, it was for your own good, though I don't know why I took pity on a wretch like you."

"The wolf pitied the lamb..." Pimen sneered.

Antropov turned away and gazed at the blue lilac-shot fringe of the shore.

"You're a foolish man," he said quietly, "a very foolish man. I shan't speak to you again. If you don't see daylight, you'll have yourself to blame. You won't get off lightly with such doings."

Nearly all the fishermen slept at the fishing-grounds. Many of them lived at the far end of the stanitsa, and did not want to make the journey home every day; and there was no need to, as the nights were warm, and the team was well provided with food.

At night, when the camp-fires were lighted at the fishing-grounds, in the field camps, and by the tractor-drivers' trailer-cabins out in the steppe—wherever people camped out—the river reflected dozens of fires flaming in the darkness; a thick pall of smoke shot with moonbeams hung over the plain, and the stanitsa looked like a hushed floating nomads' camp.

Vasili Zubov sought the company of the fishermen on such nights. He became ever more friendly with them and could listen without end to their voiced dreams about the future, to the leisurely stories of the old men about the fishing gangs of the past, and to the jolly yarns with which the tired fishermen beguiled the drowsy evenings.

The only thing that worried the fishermen were gnats.

Night after night they poked fun at Grandpa Shrimp's fear of the gnats. Strictly speaking, he had nothing to do at the fishing-grounds, as his team was not engaged in fishing, but the old man could not sit at home. He fussed round the fishermen, helping them to boat the landings to the opposite bank. He detested gnats, however, and lugged out to the fishing-grounds a huge gauze mosquito-net, which he fixed up on stakes driven into the sand, and after supper he settled himself to sleep under the canopy like a Chinese emperor.

"Grandpa Shrimp in the shroud of Christ," the fishermen rallied him. "Not a single gnat can get at him."

"He must have used up all his old woman's curtains."

"He should worry. Nothing new to him. This isn't the first time he's using a net."

"No wonder the fishers gave him that nickname!"

Not understanding what connection there was between the mosquito-net and the old man's nickname, Zubov once asked Antropov about it. The team-leader laughed, raked up the dying camp-fire with a stick, and began to tell Vasili the old man's story.

"It was a long time ago, fifty years, I daresay. I was quite a nipper at the time. It was Easter eve, and Yerofei Kuprianovich, that's to say Grandpa Shrimp, went down to the lake to catch some fresh fish for the holidays. He took a net with him and all the rest of it, and went out before dawn. Spring was forward that year, and it was quite warm. Yerofei came down to Swan Lake and threw off his clothes, and before entering the water he had a smoke."

Antropov raised a bushy eyebrow quizzically. "Lighters and matches were expensive those days, so folks just used flint and steel. Smokers used to carry a regular fire-plant about with them in their pockets—a lump of flint weighing about a pound, a steel, and tinder made out of rags or dry maize stalk. Anyway, Yerofei lit up in the nude and stuck the tinder back in his trouser-pocket. He hadn't snuffed it out properly, but he didn't notice that. Then he took his net and went into the water."

"And then what?" Vasili said, smiling.

"You wait. I don't know how long he was fishing, but he landed a few dozen carps, and decided it was time to hurry home so's his missus could prepare the fish soon as she got back from church. He crawled out of the water and went up to where his clothes were, but all he found on the bank was a little heap of ashes. They were burned out clean—trousers, shirt, cap, and all.

"It was sunrise by this time, and the sexton was pulling away at the bells. People in the stanitsa were pouring out of their houses. And there was Yerofei standing stark-naked, not knowing which way to turn. What could he

do? All he had left was his rag of a net and the flint and steel. So he wrapped himself up in the net and ran home through the back-yards. But there's no hiding from people. The youngsters spotted Yerofei and ran after him with screams and catcalls. 'Look at the shrimp caught in the net!' they yelled. From that day Yerofei Kupriyovich became known as Shrimp...."

Antropov fell silent, but the humorous smile lingered on his dark face, which was lit up by the camp-fire. He stared into the crackling flames, his powerful hands folded on his knees.

"Life was dull in our stanitsa, deadly dull," he went on musingly. "The tsar kept us off the land and off the water. There were some people who ate their heads off, dressed in frock-coats, and fed their horses with bread. But there weren't many of them—perhaps a dozen households in all! The rest of the people lived poor."

He lay down next to Vasili, and laughed. "And now? Did you hear the latest? Vitya, your landlady's boy, has received a present of a gold watch from the Minister himself!"

"What?" Vasili cried, sitting up. "I didn't hear anything about it."

"I was at the office this evening when the postman delivered a letter from the Ministry addressed to Vitya, all right and proper: 'Comrade Victor Petrovich Sazonov, care of Collective Fishery, Golubovskaya Stanitsa.' The chairman and I went over all the Sazonovs in the stanitsa but we couldn't remember anyone by the name of Victor Petrovich. So we opened the envelope and inside was an order signed by the Minister, awarding Victor Sazonov a gold watch. We guessed it was Marfa's son."

"Does he know about it?"

"Of course!" Antropov said with a smile. "We sent for him right away and handed him the order. He jumped as high as the ceiling."

"Where's the watch?"

"Comrade Bardin, the chief of the Fisheries Trust, is bringing it down from town."

"Why, is Bardin coming down to Golubovskaya?" Vasili asked.

"So I hear."

They fell silent. Swarms of gnats hovered about the fishermen sleeping round the camp-fire. Antropov decided to feed some twigs to the fire. He got up with a sigh and went over to the woods to gather some brushwood, walking barefoot on the sand, which was still warm from the day's heat. Vasili lay with his legs wrapped up in a raincoat, staring into the dying fire. The smouldering embers looked in the dark like some far-away fairy city, and it seemed to Vasili that he was looking at it from an incredible height, from the peak of the world's greatest mountain or from the window of an aeroplane floating slowly through the air. The sparks below faded, then glimmered up again like dancing lights reflected in some great river. Vasili thought of his own life, of Grunya, and of the sleeping fishermen.

The placid river gleamed faintly in the darkness; from the dam was wafted up the low monotonous murmur of the water; gambolling fish broke the stillness with soft splashings; the poplars rustled softly in the woods. All these nocturnal sounds filled Vasili's heart with a quiet exultation, a thrilling sense of fusion with the land and water, with the men who lived and toiled on this young and fragrant earth.

"Aren't you asleep yet, Vasili?" Antropov said, appearing suddenly out of the darkness.

He threw a huge bundle of brushwood off his shoulder, knelt down, and began breaking the twigs and throwing them into the fire. Tongues of flame shot up in the darkness and lit up the sandy bank, the water's edge, and

the motionless figures of the sleeping fishermen. There was a smell of resinous smoke.

Antropov stretched his bare feet out towards the fire and lay down beside Vasili, his hands under his head.

"It'll soon be daybreak," he said with a yawn. "You can tell by the stars."

"Go to sleep, Arkhip Ivanovich. I'll look after the fire," Vasili said.

"I don't feel like sleeping, somehow . . . what with the gnats and all kinds of thoughts creeping into my head."

He moved up closer and went on in a quiet voice: "Reading the newspapers makes me sick to think that while we here are working our hardest to make life better for people, those sons of sin across the ocean are stirring up trouble—testing out bombs, buying up the scum of the earth with dollars, and signing pacts against us on the sly. Looking at all this, I think to myself, now how much patience we've got to have, and how carefully we've got to husband our strength!"

Antropov's brows drew together in a frown. "Our people see the truth," he continued, "they've won that truth with their blood and toil, and you can't lead them astray. Those people on the other side can amuse themselves with that atom gadget, but we've got to hold straight on to our course and do our job properly. Isn't that so?"

"But what's troubling you, Arkhip Ivanovich?" Vasili asked.

Antropov paused reflectively, then continued slowly, with a sort of angry emphasis. "We've still got some queer fish about who'd like to wangle a ride into communism on someone else's hump. They're not pulling their weight, just pretending to work—you know the kind—thumps his chest and claims to be a hero, laying down his life for the common cause and all that—but his hands are dirty, and he only has an eye to the main chance."

Antropov's voice sank to a gloomy note. "I'd throw all such types overboard, I would."

Hearing the dry poplar twigs snapping in Zubov's hands, Antropov said: "Feed the fire with leaves and grass, it'll make more smoke. The gnats don't like smoke."

Vasili threw a handful of moist grass into the blazing fire and turned away from the smoke.

"Are there many of this weak-kneed sort among the fishermen?" he asked.

"I shouldn't say so . . . there are a few, of course—you can count them on your fingers. It's about time they got re-educated, though. But there are some who wouldn't mind taking a leaf out of Pimen Talalayev's book. And Pimen, let me tell you, is a bad egg, a rotten example to the fishermen."

"Why?"

"Because Pimen hasn't got the kolkhoz spirit," Antropov said harshly. "He's no good as a fishermen's leader. He looks on the kolkhoz like some poor devil of a day-labourer used to look on his boss—you know the sort—I'll do your plan for you and you just fork out the cash and grub. That's why he fulfils the plan just any old how—with small fry, and that kind of junk. If the shop manager took in stones instead of fish, Pimen would be the first to hand in stones. What's he care, so long as they tip the scales!"

"But how can a man like that be a team-leader?" Vasili said in astonishment. "What made you put him over a team?"

"That was a mistake, of course," Antropov admitted. "People thought he'd work properly. He works, of course, but his work isn't worth much. He's a bungler, not a team-leader. We'll have to take him off that job."

The first hesitant signs of dawn were reflected in the river. The stars paled and seemed to fade away, and bluish-white wisps of mist rose over the chilled water.

Beyond the island a streak of sunrise flashed vermillion through the trees. The blast of a ship's horn sounded round the bend of the river. The steamboat *Moskva*, with thumping paddle-wheels, approached the jetty. Anisim, the buoy-keeper, his skiff cleaving the paling water, went out to extinguish the buoy-lights.

"Economizing oil," Antropov said. "That man looks after every kopek, he loves his job. Storm or frost, nothing can stop him—works like a clock."

Antropov stretched himself with a grunt, took his dried foot-wraps off a barge-pole, carefully wound them round his feet, and pulled on his yellow-patched rubber waders. Squatting by the water's edge, he washed himself, and rubbed his swarthy bearded face red with a rough towel.

The *Moskva* steamed upstream past the fishing-grounds. The elegant steamboat with her gleaming white decks, wide blue band round her funnel, glinting port-holes, and bright-red water-line, glided towards the lock, leaving a heavy wash in her wake.

"You wait, Zubov," Antropov said, "you won't recognize our river in a year or two. We'll link it up with other rivers, raise the level, give it depth, build wharves and docks, and sea-going vessels will sail down it to the ends of the earth."

The sun rose.

Antropov took a horn whistle out of the pocket of his shirt and blew it. The young fishermen tossed off the rain-coats and padded jackets which had served them as blankets, and sprang up, yawning and jostling one another. Some in shorts, others stark-naked, they plunged into the river for their morning bath. Their staid elders washed themselves on the bank, eyeing the young men with amusement.

"Come on there, let's shoot the net!" Antropov commanded. "Breakfast afterwards!"

Mikhail Borisovich Bardin, the chief of the Fisheries Trust, went down to Golubovskaya with obvious reluctance. In the first place, it gave him no particular pleasure to handle the case of Inspector Zubov whom Talalayev, the team-leader, accused of all the deadly sins—complicity with the poachers, bribery, and speculation. Secondly, Bardin was preparing a big report to the Ministry concerning the basin fish stocks and could ill spare the time.

Bardin was still a young man and full of energy. Rather short of stature, with dark curly hair and a slightly upturned nose, he was a quick-tempered man with a vivacious personality. Despite his youth, he had already before the war held a position of trust and discharged his duties with ability. He was in charge of a vast fishing area, including the sea, coves and bays, a great river, in the delta of which was situated a state fish preserve, dozens of small rivers and tributaries, and hundreds of lakes and creeks teeming with fish.

Bardin loved his work and was considered an excellent administrator. Although he was a busy man, he yet found time for scientific research, studying the various fish species and taking a lively interest in the organization of a carp-breeding station.

The case of Inspector Zubov, who had only recently been appointed to Golubovskaya, was such a flagrant one that Bardin decided to investigate it himself on the spot.

When the speed-launch *Sturgeon*, with Bardin on board, was passing Razdorskaya Stanitsa, a light fishermen's boat with two men at the oars crossed her path at the sharp bend of the river. One of the oarsmen signalled to the skipper to stop, and the latter passed the order to the engine-room. A burly fisherman clad in a clean white

shirt, canvas trousers, and rubber hip-boots with the tops turned down, climbed on deck. It was Pimen Talalayev.

Hearing that the chief of the Fisheries Trust was coming down to Golubovskaya, Pimen had got in touch with his cousin who lived in town, and the latter had sent him a telegram informing him of Bardin's departure. Pimen had been watching the river for three days and met the launch in time with a ready excuse.

"I'm a team-leader of the Golubovskaya fishery," Pimen sedately introduced himself to the skipper. "My name is Talalayev. Could you tow us to the stanitsa, please. My oarsman is fagged out and I've got to be there in time to see Comrade Bardin."

"Comrade Bardin is here on board," the skipper said.

The engine started working below, and the launch, with a quiver, raced upstream.

Bardin came out of his cabin in a blue regulation jacket. His glance slid over Talalayev's figure and he looked away towards the bank.

"Mikhail Borisovich," the skipper said to him, "I think this is the team-leader you want."

"Are you from Golubovskaya?" Bardin asked.

"Yes, Comrade Bardin," Pimen answered. "I'm leader of the second fishing team, my name's Talalayev—Pimen Gavrilovich Talalayev. I happened to be at Razdorskaya and saw your launch going upstream, so I asked the skipper to tow us up."

Bardin went down the companion-way, throwing out to Talalayev: "Come along then, let's hear what it's all about."

Sitting in the small cabin with its shining nickel and glass, and glancing at the silk cream-coloured curtains fluttering over the open port-holes, Pimen for the first time felt a twinge of uneasiness. Bardin's cold, inscrutable face disconcerted him.

"Well?" Bardin said crisply.

Talalayev placed his sinewy hands on his knees and began to speak in a calm voice. "There isn't much to tell, Comrade Bardin. It's hard lines on the fishermen, having such an inspector to deal with. Mind you, he's a young man, and a Communist, too, but the way he carries on is a disgrace. He demands fish from the boys, dips his hand into their pockets, and is thick with the poachers. He fines them once in a while, but that's all sham, for he makes them take the confiscated fish to the market. Got up a family racket, too, that's the worst of it."

"What family racket?" Bardin said with a frown.

"We've got an under-inspector here—man by the name of Prokhorov—used to work with Likhachov. Been living in our stanitsa these last thirty years."

"What about him? I know Prokhorov."

"Well, this Prokhorov has a daughter—Grunya, who works as pisciculturist at our fishery. A young girl—she ought to be learning instead of fooling about."

Pimen paused, scratched his head, then went on in a slow, cautious way. "Well, Comrade Zubov—you know, er—he goes out with Grunya—lives with her like she was his wife. So we have the father under-inspector, the girl pisciculturist, and the son-in-law inspector. Regular family affair, you see, fore and aft——"

"What fishermen did the inspector demand a bribe from?" Bardin interrupted him.

"I brought him some fish myself—me and the under-inspector, I mean," Pimen said hesitatingly. "True, he didn't say we should, in just so many words, but he dropped us a hint."

A feeling of aversion for the man sitting opposite him came over Bardin ever more strongly as he listened to him. He looked too straight in one's eyes, this man did, his speech was too smooth and oily, and the very circumstance of his sudden appearance on the launch looked

suspicious. "There's something behind all this," Bardin mused. "I wonder what he's driving at?"

"One thing I want to tell you, Comrade Bardin," Pimen said, rising. "This job's going to be hard to unravel, because you can't get a word out of our fishers with pincers. They don't understand a thing about the political side of the matter, and they don't want to get on the wrong side of the inspector. You'll find them mute as a mackerel, and they won't be any use to you in showing Zubov up."

"All right, you may go," Bardin said. "We'll find out on the spot which of you is right and which is wrong."

He touched Pimen on the shoulder as the latter turned to go and added suddenly: "But if you have libelled the inspector, you'll have yourself to blame, Talalayev."

Vasili did not know when Bardin was arriving, so he did not come out to meet him. The only people at the jetty were Mosolov and Golovnev, the manager of the curing-shop. Bardin had a talk with them, and upon hearing that the inspector had gone out to the estuary of the Donets in the motor boat, he asked Mosolov: "How is Zubov making out?"

"Not bad," Mosolov said. "We have less poachers now and better order at the fishing-grounds."

"Comrade Zubov recently confiscated the whole day's catch of one of the teams," Golovnev said. "Since then the percentage of under-sized fishes and fry doesn't exceed the limit."

"What team was it confiscated from?" Bardin inquired.

"From the second team, Talalayev's."

"Talalayev's?"

"Yes," Mosolov confirmed. "He overshot the legal limit, so the inspector did quite right to confiscate the fish."

"Was the fish delivered to the shop?" Bardin asked Golovnev.

"Why, yes. We wrote up a statement and I took delivery of the lot."

"The whole lot?"

"To the last little fish."

"H'm! Very well," Bardin nodded. "If anyone of you happens to see Zubov, please send him to me."

"Would you care to see the under-inspector?" Mosolov asked. "He's at home, we can call him out."

"I've already sent one of the sailors for him."

Bardin questioned Mosolov about the fish hauls on the left-bank grounds, heard out Golovnev's report about the amount of fish caught by species, then asked casually: "And how about the beluga?"

"We're catching it, Comrade Bardin," Mosolov said with a smile.

"Caught many?"

"Sixty-nine."

Bardin turned his back to the wind to light a cigarette.

"What are you smiling about?" he said, glancing at the fishery chairman.

The chairman and the curing-shop manager exchanged glances.

"Well, you see, Mikhail Borisovich," Mosolov began in confusion, "folks are talking about this beluga business, it's like pouring water into a sieve, they say—just spoiling the fish. Our fishermen are used to getting quick results, you know, but here it's all guess-work."

"It's a scientific experiment," Bardin said thoughtfully, "and so long as the transplantation of the belugas is in the experimental stage it's too early to judge the results."

The talk about belugas was interrupted by the arrival of Prokhorov. Bardin invited the under-inspector into his

cabin and questioned him for a long time about Zubov. Prokhorov was nervous. Remembering the recent case of Likhachov and not knowing how to answer Bardin, he mumbled something about Zubov having put the screw on tight and that some of the fishermen nursed a grievance against him. All Bardin's attempts to find out what those grievances were proved fruitless. The under-inspector merely coughed in confusion and spread his hands with a helpless gesture.

"Well, you know how it is, a man may have a grievance for different reasons," he stammered. "With one it's this, with the other that—there's no pleasing everybody."

Bardin wearied of these incoherent mumblings, and asked Prokhorov: "Tell me, Ivan Nikanorovich, how does the inspector treat you?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"I can't complain," the under-inspector smiled. "He's a fair, sensible man, can't say anything against him. He tells me off once in a while, but that's only natural. He makes me sit up at my post at night, and sometimes he sits up with me himself."

"Does he confiscate the fish from the poachers?"

"Why, yes, of course."

"And what does he do with it?"

"It's turned over to the curing-shop, to Comrade Golovnev."

"All of it?"

"All of it."

"Doesn't the inspector keep any of it for himself?"

"Not that I know of. Comrade Chief," Prokhorov said, looking startled. "Maybe he did when I wasn't there, I couldn't answer for that. But in my presence the fish was always turned over to the fish-shop, every ounce of it."

"What happened to those carps and breams which were caught for Zubov at Talovaya?" Bardin asked.

"I couldn't say exactly, but I believe they went to the fish laboratory," Prokhorov said irresolutely.

His conversation with the under-inspector gave Bardin nothing. Prokhorov, sensing that Zubov was under suspicion, lost his head altogether. He kneaded his faded cap, coughed, smiled, and gazed at Bardin so piteously that the latter could stand it no longer.

"You may go, Ivan Nikanorovich," he said. "You're a weak man. I don't know why we're keeping you on this job—you'd do much better working in a kindergarten or planting flowers in a hot-house."

He dismissed Prokhorov and began pacing the cabin in anticipation of Zubov's return to the stanitsa. Meanwhile the fishermen had learnt of Bardin's arrival and came to see him one after another on various matters. In the course of the conversation, which touched on fry preservation, fishing-grounds, and close-time regulations, Bardin sounded them out about Zubov. The fishermen had nothing but good to say of him, although some deprecated his excessive severity and declared he was not doing enough to help the fishery fulfil its plan.

"What do you expect him to do?" Bardin said, smiling. "Go out and shoot the net with you or allow you to fish in the prohibited zones? That's the kind of job he has, it can't be helped. It's your business to fulfil the state plan, and his to protect the state's fish stocks and enforce the regulations."

Towards evening Antropov came into the cabin. He greeted Bardin curtly, sat down on a chair, and started speaking in a gruff tone without waiting to be questioned.

"I've been told some swine has written a report against the inspector. We have a team-leader of that description here—Talalayev."

Antropov's keen grey eyes drilled Bardin. "I think you know the man, Comrade Bardin. He came up with

you on the launch. He was three or four days on the lookout for you."

"I didn't invite him aboard," Bardin said, flushing. "He asked the skipper for a lift somewhere at the bend."

"He's a mean type," Antropov went on unperturbed. "We're going to knock him off his perch and maybe kick him out of the kolkhoz altogether."

"But isn't Talalayev fulfilling the catch plan?" Bardin interposed. "That's the main thing, isn't it?"

"Plan fulfilment is only one side of the medal," Antropov said coolly, drumming his fingers on the table. "Talalayev fulfils the plan because he makes good money on it and gets such a big fish ration that he sells it on the market. The thing is how does he fulfil the plan? He palms off all kinds of small fishes, anything to tip the scales, and kills the young fishes by the thousand. That kind of false shock-work is of no use to us. We want a fisher who'll fulfil the plan and run things on the river the Michurin way, so it'll give us more valuable fish every year. That's the kind of fisherman our Party organization's out to rear, and this fellow Pimen is not going to put spokes in our wheels—we'll see to that."

"Inspector Zubov is Pimen's greatest menace to-day," he continued, with a glance at Bardin, "because Zubov is guarding the state's interests, while Pimen doesn't care a hang for them. He's looking after his own interests. We still have some fools who shut their eyes to Pimen's little game. The fish comes in, so well and good! You report plan fulfilment to headquarters, so everything's fine! But if to-morrow you find nothing in the meshes, you've got a good excuse—a natural calamity, no more fish in the river. You can whistle for the culprit then—can't very well call Nature to account, can you?"

Bardin felt a weight being lifted from his mind as he listened to Antropov. He was impressed by the knowledge and vision of this quiet-spoken, deliberate man with

the low, husky voice. Men like him were badly needed for the vast fishing industry scattered throughout the seas and rivers.

His conversation with Antropov almost convinced Bardin of Zubov's innocence, but late that evening Pimen Talalayev came into his cabin and, with a gloomy bow, laid some papers on the table. They were the report about the confiscated catch on the Donets and the receipt signed by Golovnev. "There," Pimen said, "read that."

"What is it?" Bardin said, frowning.

"Can't you see?" Pimen growled. "Documents signed and sealed by people in authority."

Bardin read the papers and shrugged his shoulders. "I don't understand. What has Inspector Zubov got to do with this? His name doesn't figure here anywhere."

Talalayev, without waiting for an invitation, seated himself sedately on a metal stool screwed to the wall.

"I'll give you the whole story," Pimen began. "It happened recently on the Donets. The under-inspector was on duty—Ivan Prokhorov, you know, the man whose daughter Comrade Zubov is going out with. Well, I and Grandpa Shrimp, that's to say Sazonov, caught a couple of poachers and turned the fish over to the shop. The under-inspector made out as if he didn't know anything, pretended to be asleep in a haystack. It's all written down here."

"Still, I don't see where the inspector comes in," Bardin said.

"Quite simple. Prokhorov had orders from the inspector to allow the cook of the dredge-boat to do illegal fishing. Prokhorov used to work under Likhachov and ought to have been given the push long ago, but the inspector took him under his wing, because he lives with the man's daughter."

Pimen then gave the names of the fishermen who had, on Zubov's instructions, fished at Talovaya during close-

time and selected hundreds of the best breams and carps for the inspector.

"Grunya Prokhorova picked the fish out herself and boated them down to the stanitsa," Pimen said. "When I asked her what Comrade Zubov wanted so many fishes for, she said it was for experiments."

Bardin made notes of everything Talalayev said, then waved his hand in dismissal. "All right, go along. I'll look into this."

He sent for Antropov and asked him why Zubov had not discharged the under-inspector before this, and told him about the man having slept at his post, and, worse still, having abetted the poachers.

"I don't know," Antropov answered gloomily. "You'd better ask the inspector himself. I warned him that Prokhorov ought to be fired."

"You warned him?" Bardin became alert.

"I did."

"And what did he say?"

"He told me he couldn't very well discharge the man just because he had worked with Likhachov."

"I see," Bardin said wryly. "So Zubov did actually protect Prokhorov and disagreed with the opinion of the Party organization."

"It wasn't the opinion of the Party organization, it was my own opinion."

"The fact remains," Bardin said irritably, "that you, as Secretary of the Party organization, suggested that the under-inspector should be dismissed, but Zubov defended him and consequently bears full responsibility for what happened on the Donets——"

Antropov, breathing hard, interrupted him. "Wait a minute. I didn't particularly insist on his dismissing Prokhorov, so in a way I'm partly to blame, too."

Antropov made arrangements with Bardin to see him the next day and went home. On the way he ran across

Zubov, who had just returned from his trip. Vasili was running down the street, lighting his way with his torch, and he greeted Antropov gaily.

"I warned you, but you wouldn't listen to me," Antropov checked him. "Now you'll have to clear up the mess."

"What mess?" Vasili asked in alarm.

"I told you to dismiss Prokhorov, but you would have your own way. It's your own fault. That Prokhorov of yours fell asleep at his post, and Pimen Talalayev caught some poachers on his beat and reported it to Bardin."

"So what of it?"

"Well, it looks like you were protecting your assistant only because—well—you know——"

"What?"

"Because of his daughter," Antropov snapped.

"What do you mean?" Vasili said, flushing. "She herself insisted I should dismiss him."

"That's just it. I advised you to fire Prokhorov, too, and take on a new assistant—a Komsomol fisherman. And now go to your chief and explain the thing to him."

Vasili's face clouded. "All right. I'll have a talk with Bardin."

"A talk is not enough," Antropov said harshly. "You've got to admit your mistake honestly and take care it doesn't happen again. Get me? It isn't only in Bardin's cabin that you'll have to admit your mistake, Vasili Kirilovich."

"Where else?"

"At the next Party meeting."

"Very well. I'm prepared to answer for everything I do," Vasili said.

Taking his leave of Antropov, he ran straight down to the river, but a fisherman of the transport team told him that Bardin had just left.

"Where's he gone?" Vasili asked in dismay.

"How should I know. Somewhere upstream. The

launch passed through the lock just as you came running down."

Vasili slowly retraced his steps. For the first time during his stay in the stanitsa he felt that he had made a mistake. He realized now that he had acted wrongly in the case of Prokhorov. The most unpleasant part about it was that it implicated Grunya. He had ignored her advice, as he had that of Antropov, and now the blame was all his.

He sat at home for a while, giving reluctant answers to Marfa's anxious questions, and then went to see Prokhorov to ask him about what had happened on the Donets.

Vasili thought the Prokhorovs knew nothing yet of Bardin's arrival and Talalayev's report. But Grunya came out of her room with a tear-stained face.

"Well, who was right?" she said to Vasili angrily. "What will you say now?"

Prokhorov ran forward to meet Vasili, blinking pitifully and stammering: "It's all my fault, Vasili Kirillovich. I let you down. I fell asleep at my post...."

Vasili gently pushed him aside and sat down on a stool.

"Well, what have you to say?" Grunya repeated.

Vasili was silent, obviously loath to speak.

"Yes, I was mistaken," he said at length, looking up at Grunya. "I'm more to blame than anyone else. As for your father, you were right. I should have let him go, not because he's a bad man, but because he's a weak one. I didn't consider that, didn't think what harm he could cause without meaning to do so. And that's what has happened. I'll answer for him, and it will be a good lesson to me."

"What shall I do now?" Prokhorov said bewildered. "Where shall I go, what shall I do for a living?"

"Don't be downhearted, Ivan Nikanorovich," Vasili said. "You didn't do it with malicious intention, and it

won't enter anyone's mind to punish you severely. We'll find you another job—the duties of under-inspector are really too much for you."

Prokhorov glanced in confusion at the pendulum-clock on the wall and went up to Zubov. "It's my time to go out on the beat. What do you say, Vasili Kirillovich, should I go or stay at home?"

"You're still on the job, Ivan Nikanorovich," Vasili said. "So I think you'd better go. I'll drop in on you later in the day."

As soon as Prokhorov had gone, Vasili rose to go, too. Grunya was sitting silent and subdued. He took her hand and said softly: "I'm sorry, Grunya. I know how painful it is for you."

He left the Prokhorovs, called out the motor-man, and set off to make the round of his area.

Next day the whole stanitsa was talking about the incident on the Donets and Pimen Talalayev's report. The fishermen condemned Pimen's conduct and suspected that the team-leader was taking his revenge on Zubov for the confiscated catch.

When Yegor Ivanovich heard of Pimen's action, he spat in disgust and said: "He's a bird of prey, a vulture."

Antropov talked it over with Mosolov, and went up to the District Party Committee and asked Nazarov to intervene and advise the chief of the Fisheries Trust not to draw hasty conclusions.

"All right," Nazarov said. "I'll come down to the stanitsa to-morrow and have a chat with Bardin. In the meantime find some suitable job for the under-inspector, otherwise one fine day he'll get your inspector into a worse scrape."

The next morning the Secretary of the D.P.C. arrived in the stanitsa and visited Bardin aboard the launch. He had a long talk with him about Zubov and Talalayev.

"Bear in mind," he said, pacing the cabin, "that

fishing kolkhozes are way behind the farming kolkhozes, not only in husbandry methods, but in results, too. The river stands witness. We're all to blame for this, and it's high time we tackled the problem seriously. We've got to learn to control the fish stocks, but nothing will come of it unless the people are in it."

He stopped in front of Bardin with his thumbs hooked into his belt. "We don't know our people well enough, Comrade Bardin," he said in clipped tones. "This youngster of yours will make a good inspector. He has made a mistake, granted. He must be put right. But men like Talalayev must be taught by the most rigorous of methods. A team-leader, indeed! He's a self-seeker, a grabber. He ought to be kicked out of the team, and if he doesn't reform, the kolkhoz would be well rid of him. Otherwise he'll play dirty tricks on the fishery and be a millstone round its neck. This Prokhorov chap can be transferred to some other job. I was told that Golovnev is in need of weighers and receivers in the curing-shop. You could make use of him there."

"The whole thing's clear to me, Comrade Nazarov," said Bardin. "Talalayev, of course, must be removed from the team. As for Zubov, he's young and inexperienced, and he needs assistance. He's started a big useful job here—and that's a very good thing. But he'll probably stumble more than once, and I'd like you to help him in his work."

Before leaving Golubovskaya Nazarov sent word through Antropov that Vasili should call on him at the District Party Committee.

"Tell him not to put it off, but come up and see me to-day," Nazarov said. "To-morrow he won't find me—I'll be busy in the kolkhozes."

Vasili, when he heard of the invitation, borrowed Mosolov's bicycle, crossed the Don by boat, and cycled up to the district stanitsa by the forest path. He looked

forward to the interview with anxiety. "I suppose he'll ask me about this affair with Prokhorov," he thought. "Shouldn't be surprised if I get a reprimand."

The path ran in a winding line. Planted oak and maple saplings stood out greenly among the old silvery poplars. Cuckoo-calls sounded incessantly in the thickets. On the right, hidden from view by the trees, a tractor sputtered, and somewhere close at hand mowing-machines chirred.

It was stuffy in the woods, and not until Vasili came out on to a knoll, where the low river valley rose to a sheer bluff, did he feel a breath of fresh air. He cycled down the level dusty roadside. Lorries sped past him up and down the road. On the right, the galvanized iron tanks of the petrol station gleamed like huge airships, and behind them towered the white granaries of the district grain purveyors.

At the Party Committee office Zubov was told that the Secretary was at a conference of the District Executive Committee. Vasili decided to go there.

Britzkas, waggons, dusty motor cycles and bicycles were parked outside the building of the Executive Committee. Unharnessed horses chewed green grass out of cart-boxes. Two drivers in greasy overalls sweated over the punctured tyre of a three-ton lorry. The scene reminded Vasili of a regimental or brigade headquarters, and before going into the building, he ran his fingers over his belt by force of habit, buttoned up the collar of his tunic, and straightened his cap.

People were sitting and standing about the corridor in knots, smoking and listening to the voices issuing from a half-open door. Among them Vasili espied Bugrov, the chairman of the Golubovskaya collective farm.

"What's on?" Vasili asked him.

"Discussing haymaking progress," Bugrov said with a preoccupied air.

"Have they been at it long?"

"It'll soon be over—only two farms left to deal with."

"Is Comrade Nazarov here?"

"Yes," Bugrov said, smiling. "Hauled me over the coals about the hay. Said I was bungling the job."

Vasili peeped in through the door. In a large room with wide-open windows some twenty people were sitting around a table covered with a red cloth. A middle-aged man in an embroidered shirt was standing by the window, stroking his bald head and delivering a detailed report about the haymaking, silage, and pasturing.

On the left, his elbow resting on the leather bolster of a sofa, sat Nazarov. He held a sunburned hand over his eyes and seemed to be dozing. But as soon as the speaker had finished and a young man in blue overalls took his place and, with a flourish of his note-book, began confidently to report that haymaking on his farm was nearing completion, the Secretary suddenly asked: "Treshchenko! How many hectares were mowed and ricked yesterday?"

The young man consulted his note-book. "Thirty hectares by tractors," he said, addressing Nazarov, "and twelve by horse-drawn mowers, altogether forty-two hectares."

"Is that what your note-book says?" Nazarov asked coolly.

"Yes, Tikhon Filippovich."

The Secretary removed his hand from his face. "Here, let's have a look at it," he said.

The young man in the overalls reddened and had a sudden fit of coughing. The farm chairmen sitting round the table laughed.

"Don't be shy, give it here!" Nazarov said.

He took the note-book, turned over the leaves, then glared at its owner. "Forty-two hectares, you say? Why have you got twenty-two written down here? Where did

you get the extra twenty from? Who are you trying to fool?"

"We had two tractor stoppages," the young man faltered, "so we're a bit behindhand. We'll cut those twenty hectares to-night, Tikhon Filippovich."

"I know you will," Nazarov said sternly, "but that's not the point. The point is the Party and the Soviet Government can't tolerate lies. D'you understand? Take your note-book; Tereshchenko, and be good enough to report the actual facts. We don't need cooked up figures here. Is that clear? Every day and every hour we have to know the true state of affairs and not lull ourselves with fibs."

He handed the note-book back to the discomfited lad and heard his report out. Seeing Zubov in the doorway, he leaned over to the chairman of the District Executive Committee and said: "I'll be back soon."

He went out into the court-yard with Vasili, sat down on one of the *britzkas*, and said: "Well, what's happened down at your place?"

The Secretary's grey eyes, heavy-lidded from lack of sleep, had a calm waiting look as though he knew beforehand what the youth in the officer's tunic standing before him was going to say. Vasili understood that he would have to be brief, frank, and clear with this man.

"I've made a blunder," he said, bringing each word out firmly.

"What blunder?"

"I pitied Prokhorov, the under-inspector, and although I was warned about it, I didn't dismiss him. Prokhorov has now committed an offence, and people think I didn't dismiss him because I—because——" Vasili faltered, reddened, then plunged on, "because I love his daughter."

"Maybe that's why you really kept such an incompetent assistant?" Nazarov said, suppressing a smile.

"No, Tikhon Filippovich, I was just sorry for him.

He's been working in the fishery inspectorate for twenty years. I thought I'd be able to make him work."

"You thought so *then*?" Nazarov said, regarding Vasili closely.

"Yes."

"And now?"

"Now I see I made a mistake. I should have taken Antropov's advice and chosen a new under-inspector who was not infected with the Likhachov taint."

Vasili fell silent, expecting the Secretary to take him up, but the latter chewed a blade of grass and said nothing.

At length Nazarov broke the silence. "You made another mistake, I believe, the day you arrived."

"I did, Tikhon Filippovich. I accepted, against my wishes, the fish Talalayev brought me," Vasili said, stroking the mudguard of the *britzka*. "I didn't want to take it, but the team-leader insisted and said the fishermen would be offended if I refused."

"And now that team-leader says you took a bribe from him. Isn't that so?"

"Yes."

"There you are."

Nazarov looked Vasili in the face and said quietly:

"That's what I called you out for, Comrade Zubov. I'm glad you admitted your mistakes. We're all liable to make mistakes. But it takes Bolshevik courage to admit them honestly and mend them. Understand? I believe you have that courage. Did you hear Tereshchenko, the chairman of one of the hamlet kolkhozes? He's not a bad chap, mind you, but he hasn't the courage to admit his mistakes, and that's why he sometimes goes in for eye-washing. He has to be called to order and constantly kept in hand."

Nazarov toyed with the forelock of a horse that stood dozing by the *britzka*.

"Yours is a difficult area, Zubov," he went on. "Difficult because people there have got used to robbing the river with impunity, and fish is still looked on as no man's property. That harmful idea has to be rooted out. D'you understand? And remember this, you will achieve nothing at all by yourself. You've got to win the support of the best people. And you don't show enough interest in people, Comrade Zubov. I've been told you've studied your area and have already visited every creek and registered every little pond. That's very good. But who's in the public fishery inspection down at your place? That same Talalayev. How can you trust a man like that? What were you thinking of when Talalayev was nominated for the public inspectorate? There are plenty of fine people in the stanitsa; the Komsomol youth are growing up; you could have selected a body of capable honest assistants, got in close touch with the people, and explained the new tasks to the fishermen."

"I meet the fishermen very often," Vasili demurred. "I made several reports about fish protection and stock replenishing——"

"That's not enough," Nazarov interrupted him in a hard tone. "You must know every fisherman in your district, you must encourage the front-rankers, get all the rank and file enthusiastic about the new splendid methods of fish husbandry, make them believe in what you are doing."

Nazarov's eyes softened and he added with a smile: "Go home, Zubov. Choose yourself a new under-inspector, try to get the best fishermen into the public inspectorate, learn leadership. And when you're in difficulties, apply to the District Party Committee—we'll always help you. Go along, then. I'll drop in now and again."

His fears set at rest, Vasili raced home on his bicycle, smiling and elated.

Zubov did not see Bardin until the evening, when

they met at the general meeting, at which Vitya Sazonov was to be presented with the gold watch, the gift from the Minister. Bardin and Zubov sat next to each other in the presidium, and Bardin, during the preliminaries, managed to have a word with Vasili about Talalayev's report.

"You have to be very careful, Zubov," he told him. "Such incidents are likely to occur again in the future. Talalayev's type will exist for some time yet, unfortunately, so you have to guard the reputation of the fishery inspection against slander and take care not to give anyone the slightest excuse for intrigue and gossip."

Vasili coloured deeply. He leaned over to Bardin and said quietly: "It won't happen again. Nobody will lead me astray, Mikhail Borisovich, because the Talalayevs are few here, and the real Soviet people number thousands."

Pimen Talalayev obviously realized that his game was up. He had not been elected to the presidium, and now hid from the mocking eyes of the fishermen in a dark corner of the hall. Grunya, who had learned of Nazarov's meeting with Bardin from her father, was worried, and she kept her eyes fixed on Vasili's face as though trying to read there the result of his talk with the chief of the Fisheries Trust. Marfa, who had heard about Pimen's report, was worried, too. Most of the fishermen already knew that Talalayev had been exposed as a slanderer and mischief-maker, and this was now the subject of animated conversation among them as their eyes sought the hiding culprit.

The meeting severely condemned Talalayev's mean behaviour and unanimously approved the resolution relieving him of the duties of team-leader.

Vitya Sazonov alone of all those present was lost to the world. He was in the seventh heaven. All the evening he had been the centre of attraction of a curious

crowd of grown-ups and children. They had tried to catch his eye, had smiled at him, and everyone had had something nice to say to him. Even the sombre Professor Shchetinin, on passing by, had ruffled Vitya's hair and growled: "Had a hair-cut after all?"

"I went up to the district centre with Ma," Vitya had explained, "and went to the barber's."

"Good boy," Shchetinin nodded. "They wouldn't have elected you to the presidium otherwise."

When Vitya took his place in the presidium, Marfa forgot all else in the world. Thrilled and excited, she sat nervously fumbling her kerchief and could not tear her eyes away from her son. The latter, solemn and still, sat next to Shchetinin, sedulously copying the old man's poses—now stroking his knee, now hooking his thumb into the slit of his white shirt and staring into the lighted hall with an air of abstraction.

Vitya paid but scant attention to what Bardin was saying. The only thing that mattered was that the Minister himself had awarded him, Victor Petrovich Sazonov (so the order ran), a gold watch for his improvement of the check-trap. He had no interest in the rest of the meeting's business and sat waiting on tenter-hooks for the chief of the Fisheries Trust to open the little yellow leather-bound box and show everyone his watch.

The fishermen did not seem to share Vitya's impatience. They listened to Bardin with interest, threw amused glances at Vitya, and spoke to one another in undertones:

"If you've earned a reward you get it!"

"He deserves it, too!"

"Smart kid. That trap's a useful gadget."

Grandpa Shrimp, proud of his grandson, nudged Marfa and boomed into her ear: "It runs in the family. His dad Pyotr was a smart one too. Awfully clever at things he was—sawing and planing. One day he'd carve

a horse or a Cossack with a lance and fix it up on the roof, the next he'd make a five-storied bird-house or some other clever thing...."

Behind Marfa sat her neighbours, the fisherwomen of the net team. They hissed at Grandpa Shrimp to silence his whisperings, but a minute later would be whispering to Marfa themselves:

"What a lucky woman you are, Marfa, to have a son like that!"

"A fine youngster!"

"Deserves a present from his mother, too!"

Marfa felt a hot, choky sensation in her throat and a haze rose before her eyes. She gazed at her son sitting in the presidium and wiped her tears away with a corner of her kerchief, murmuring in protest: "Oh, stop it! Every one of you has children and they're all just as restless as mine. All the world's cares seem to be on their shoulders these days, not like it was when we——"

The presentation of the Minister's gift was a red-letter day for the whole stanitsa. Many fishermen spoke that evening. They spoke about the fishery's new affairs, called on the young people to follow "Comrade Sazonov's" example, and praised the blushing hero in chary but heartfelt words.

After Bardin had read out the Minister's order and strapped the gold watch with its snow-white dial and large gleaming second-hand on to Vitya's wrist, Professor Shchetinin said with a twinkle: "You ought to say something by way of reply, Victor Petrovich!"

Vitya glanced around, got up, put the watch to his ear, blushed, and said: "It's—er—nine minutes past eleven. Time to close the meeting—we've got to be out at the fishing-grounds at dawn!"

CHAPTER FIVE

1

Hot summer weather set in. The haymaking was over and tall ricks of neatly packed hay dotted the wide flood meadow. The blazing steppe sun beat down relentlessly on the unmown meadow grasses which had been left for pasturing, tinging them with yellow and making them brittle and hard as wire. Only in the low-lying places, around the lakes, and on the fringes of the woods where the thick crowns of the trees cast their shadows upon the ground, did the grass grow green and lush. Here, on these green islets, the stanitsa herds grazed. The old kolkhoz herdsmen with dark sunburnt faces stood for hours, leaning on their staffs and gazing into the sun-scorched, russet steppe.

New people had appeared on the steppe hillocks, the ancient Tatar burial-mounds, and the steep rocky gullies of the Northern Donets. Surveyors pegged the ground, hydraulic engineers measured the level of the river-bed, geologists probed the earth with drills, and designers made rough drafts, plans, and sketches. Lorries and passenger cars raced back and forth across the steppe, leaving curling trails of grey dust in their wake. Self-propelled barges loaded with building timber and towing strings of flat-boats, scows, and seine-boats with cargoes

of bricks, cement, sheet iron, lime, and glass, were sailed up the blue river by taciturn *makhorka*-smoking skippers.

The herdsmen, watching these activities, shook their heads and murmured thoughtfully: "There isn't a thing men can't do in our country these days. Now they've started to remake the land."

"Aye, tending it like a flower to make it more beautiful and useful."

One hot day a self-propelled barge moored alongside the Golubovskaya jetty. On board, by the glassed-in deck-house, stood Kuzma Mosolov. He was wearing his best suit and all his military decorations, and he had the solemn and festive air of a man about to make an important speech.

All the villagers knew that their chairman had been to town and had spent a fortnight there, but what he could have been doing there so long, no one knew. Mosolov had been summoned to town to report on the affairs of his fishery, and while there he had been informed that the headquarters of the motor-fishing stations had received orders to mechanize the Golubovskaya fishery, and was shipping to the stanitsa a big consignment of machines, two tractors, and a motor launch with a refrigerator plant.

"It's time you put your fishery on a higher technical level," the chief engineer had told Mosolov. "We're giving you new winches, electric motors, and tractors, and we'll send specialists down to install them. You've got to squeeze all you can out of these machines and increase the fish catch."

"The kolkhoz will fulfil its task," Mosolov had answered with dignity.

He had gone down to the stores with the engineers to select the machines and had personally attended to their loading at the wharves.

At the last moment Bardin, the chief of the Fisheries Trust, had phoned Mosolov and asked him to load a prefabricated house together with the other equipment.

"A house?" Mosolov had asked in surprise.

"Yes. We recently received several prefabricated houses for the fishery inspectorate," Bardin explained. "I've decided to send one of them down to Golubovskaya for your inspector. He's still living in lodgings, I believe?"

"Yes, he's lodging with one of our kolkhoz women, Marfa Sazonova."

"I thought so. We've allotted one of these houses for the Golubovskaya inspector. Please see that it's loaded on the barge, will you? We're sending it down to the wharf straight away."

"All right, Comrade Bardin, it'll be delivered safe and sound," Mosolov had said.

When the barge came alongside the jetty, Mosolov came up on deck, looking for all the world as though it were he who had secured and brought down all this cargo, which nimble boatmen in canvas gauntlets were unloading from the hold amid a clang of cranes and chains.

"See that?" the chairman said to the fishermen. "We'll have a regular factory here by the time the spring season starts. And if you think we're the only ones, you're mistaken. Just look what's doing on the river! Hundreds of craft sailing up and down...."

Avdei Talalayev, the ferryman, sitting in his hut, watched the heavily laden barges pass through the lock.

"That's the end of our stanitsa, Pimen," he said to his brother, who lay sprawling on the bunk. "No more flood water for us in the spring. It was it that kept our stanitsa going—the fish spawned in the flood meadows, and our vegetable plots did well on the flooded land, so did our vineyards. Now that's all done for."

Pimen lay grim and silent. Shortly after Bardin's arrival he had been relieved of his team-leader duties and sent to work as a fisherman in Grandpa Shrimp's net team. Stepan Khudyakov was now working as team-leader in his place.

Pimen resented his transfer to old Shrimp's team where he, a famous fisherman, was obliged to "fiddle around with a bunch of women." True, Mosolov had tried to persuade Khudyakov, the new team-leader, to let Pimen stay on in the second team, but Stepan had flatly refused, declaring he would have nothing to do with him. And so Pimen Talalayev found himself in Grandpa Shrimp's team. He went out several times to the lakes with the fisherwomen, and then, pleading illness, he stayed indoors more and more often.

On the rare occasions when Pimen did come out to work he felt upon himself the mocking, wary glances of the women and heard their offensive remarks uttered in tones meant to be heard.

"I'm afraid we won't catch anything to-day—Uncle Pimen's come."

"Yes, all the fishes are scared of him."

"Even the roach will keep out of his way."

Sometimes Pimen would snap back at them lazily, but usually he held his peace, doing what he had to do in a leisurely way or sitting on the bank and eyeing the women with a hostile look.

"Never mind, Uncle Pimen," Marfa comforted him cheerfully, "don't take it hard. What if you have lost your job and have been sent to work in the women's team? It's not as bad as all that. You wait, our women will make a man of you yet."

"Leave me alone, Marfa," Pimen snapped back. "What do you know about it!"

Marfa winked at the laughing fisherwomen and said judiciously: "What do you mean, Uncle Pimen? Haven't

you been sent here to be re-educated? In a manner of speaking, we're responsible for you."

"What are you chattering about!" Pimen growled. "Re-education be damned! I'm a sick man. My legs are shaky and I feel kind of queer inside."

To support the fiction of his illness, Pimen went about in huge felt boots, despite the heat, and carried a heavy stick. When he met anybody in the stanitsa, he complained that he was suffering from rheumatism.

He came to his brother's hut every day and lay down on the musty earth bunk, staring in silence at the cob-webbed reed ceiling. Avdei, glancing at him nervously, made several attempts to draw him out, but Pimen checked him with an angry, "Oh, leave me alone, Avdei. It's through you I got it in the neck, damn you."

He listened to Avdei's dismal laments in moody silence and yawned himself to sleep. The ferryman, thinking his brother was only pretending to be asleep, went on pouring out his dirge in a dreary monotone.

"My ferry-boat's falling to pieces, it can hardly hold a couple of carts, but the farm chairman doesn't care a rap. Wait a bit, he says, we'll soon build a new ferry-boat."

Bugrov, the chairman of the collective farm, had indeed come down to the bank and promised Avdei to build a new ferry-boat. The ferry had been worrying him for some time. The corn was ripening in the field, and soon they would have to start making grain deliveries, but the elevator was situated in the district stanitsa on the left bank. The Secretary of the District Party Committee had warned Bugrov that their district had pledged itself to prompt and early deliveries and that the grain was not to be kept lying at the threshing-floors for any longer than necessary.

"If you're hard up for transport, we'll let you have some lorries," Nazarov had said, "but you've got to exert every effort to fulfil your pledge."

"The ferry's in a poor way," Bugrov said, scratching his head. "It's an old boat and is almost useless, but we haven't got round to building a new one yet."

"You have two kolkhozes in the stanitsa, and you can't build a ferry-boat between you?" the Secretary demanded. "You ought to be ashamed to speak about it, Comrade Bugrov."

Bugrov had tried to tackle Mosolov about the ferry, but that thrifty chairman had merely shrugged his shoulders and treated the matter as a joke.

"What do the fishermen want a ferry for?" he said with a smile. "We live on the water all our lives, my dear man. We have boats to do the work for us. It's you farmers who need the ferry because you can't cross the river in a cart, but we don't need it at all."

"Oh, come, come," Bugrov tried to reason with the intractable chairman, "you can't do without the ferry when you have animals to bring across or hay. Let's pool funds and buy some good timber. The two kolkhozes will build a ferry-boat our children will be thankful for."

"No, Zakhar Petrovich," Mosolov said, "our fishery can't afford to throw away good money. We're going to build a fish hatchery and are thinking of installing a five hundred outlet radio relay station. I can't have this ferry on my neck, too."

"All you care about is your own kolkhoz," Bugrov reproached him. "That's not the way Communists should look at things—they ought to take a broader view, if you ask me. It isn't as if only the Golubovskaya folks need the ferry. There's the hamlets and farmsteads scattered all over the hills, people from the kolkhozes there have to use the ferry, and the stanitsas on the left bank bring coal from the railway station for all kinds of factories. I'm ashamed to look people in the face, I am. I think we ought to be more state-minded, Kuzma Fedorovich."

Despite Bugrov's coaxing, Mosolov remained adamant. The fishery had a stock of excellent planks, but Mosolov kept them for repairing the fishing-fleet and refused to use them for the ferry. The villagers were therefore obliged to convey their carts to the left bank in heavy boats and drive their oxen or horses through the water.

The huge oxen fought shy of entering the water and had to be driven in with sticks. They rushed about the bank in a panic, until, cowed by the shouts, they plunged into the water bellowing loudly. Finding themselves out of their depth, they swam after the boats. The swift current swept the oxen downstream, and they struggled against it with ebbing strength, their blood-shot eyes bulging with terror. The man sitting in the stern of the boat had to keep tugging at the ropes tied round the animals' heads to save them from drowning. At last the oxen clambered out on to the bank reeling with exhaustion.

Seeing all this, and bearing in mind that the time for grain deliveries was approaching, Bugrov persuaded Zhigayev, the chairman of the stanitsa Soviet, to call a meeting of the stanitsa Party members to discuss the question of the ferry. Mosolov, even then, could not be induced to build a ferry-boat, but put to shame by the Communists, he finally agreed, sorely against his grain, to give the necessary timber. The collective farm was to supply the other materials and labour. A joint meeting of the two kolkhozes supported the proposal of the Communists.

"Well, Pimen, our bosses have decided to go ahead with the new ferry," Avdei told his brother.

"Damn the ferry!" Pimen muttered. "What do I care."

He got off the bunk, thrust his feet into a pair of *valenki*, yawned, and went over to the open door of the hut.

The sun-drenched river was dazzling. Nets stretched out on stakes showed darkly against the white sand of

Talovaya. A string of barges loaded with timber huddled round the dam on the left bank, and the yellow tug-boat *Dekabrist* snorted in and out among the barges, towing them through the lock. The smell of pitch, fish, and petrol floated up from the river.

Pimen turned to his brother and passed his hand over his stiff bristly moustache. "I'll show them yet, Avdei. This inspector's got a bigger handful in Pimen Talalayev than he thinks. I'm not Yegor, I mean business."

Pimen concentrated all his hatred on Zubov. It was the inspector, he thought, who was to blame for that eager enthusiasm for radical changes which had gripped the whole stanitsa. Rage blinded him to the fact that all the fishermen had made rapid strides in their mental outlook, and that even the oldest had begun to realize that the fisheries would have to be run on new lines. A new type of Soviet fisherman was emerging in the fishing teams of the great river—a man who, like his collective-farm neighbour, was out to control the elemental forces of Nature and not be their slave. This new fisherman was already looking into the future, striving to plan stock replenishments fifty years ahead.

Pimen Talalayev was blind to all this. He refused to see it.

Shortly after being removed from his post as team-leader, Pimen learned that the second team was fulfilling no more than seventy to eighty per cent of its weekly quota.

"Hear that?" Pimen told the ferryman with a malicious grin. "That half-baked team-leader, Stepan Khudyakov, has fallen down on the job!"

"Is that so!" Avdei cackled. "Throwing a sprat to catch a whale, eh?"

Pimen sunk his head gloomily. "They'll remember me yet. When I was in the team we always had fish, but now the Sudachi folks are leaving us nowhere—it's a cry-

ing shame. Arkhip, at a pinch, manages to knock up a hundred per cent, but Stepan is a wash-out—just rinses the nets in the water.”

Indeed, the red flag flew from the Sudachi mast every day, whilst the Golubovskaya fishermen glanced at their own mast and hung their heads. The Golubovskaya fishing kolkhoz was not fulfilling its daily quota.

This worried Mosolov so much that on meeting Antropov he hazarded the suggestion that Pimen Talalayev should be taken back.

“We’re stuck, Arkhip,” he said. “Stepan isn’t making a go of it. I was wondering whether it wouldn’t be better to send Talalayev back to the second team. He’s been punished enough and realizes his mistake—he’ll work like a fiend now.”

“He fished like a fiend, too,” Antropov said curtly. “We need a man in the team, not a fiend. Get me? That style of work doesn’t suit us.”

“But the second team isn’t fulfilling its plan, it’s letting the whole kolkhoz down. Why should we keep an experienced team-leader on the backstairs? The Sudachi folks have beaten us by forty tons already. We’re getting telegrams from headquarters every day, with reminders, warnings, reprimands. It’s no joke!”

“Don’t get panicky, Kuzma Fedorovich,” Antropov said morosely. “We’ve got to ensure proper fulfilment of the plan and not just scamp the job. The work that Pimen did was botchery and eye-wash.”

“That’s what I want to do—ensure fulfilment of the plan. Khudyakov can’t manage the team. He’s young and inexperienced, and we go and put him in charge of a team of half a hundred fishers. It’s in the common interest that Talalayev should be taken back.”

“The Party organization will not agree to it,” Antropov said sharply. “You and I will go down to the fishing-grounds to-morrow and see how Stepan is handling the

job before we decide anything. I won't have this young Komsomol lad kicked about like a football. Get me?"

Early the next morning, before sunrise, Mosolov and Antropov met by the river and rowed down to the second team's fishing-grounds, which lay off the bend in the river.

The river looks its best in the morning. At this early hour no wind ruffles its cool, crystal-clear water, which shines with a soft luminosity, reflecting the translucent pink-blue sky. No boats disturb the smooth, placid pool, and only a revelling carp will leap out with a splash or a swift osprey will skim across and dip its sharp, white-lined wing, leaving on the glassy surface widening rings of roseate ripples, which vanish silently and imperceptibly.

Only a fisherman really knows the enchantment of early morning on the river—those white spectral mists shot with blue and melting in the dawn; those green banks with golden sand stretching far into the distance, and above them the dark streak of poplar woods; those rainbow-tinted beams of sunrise playing upon the serene river; the tang of wet sand, fish, tar, and grass; that unearthly stillness in which the faintest of sounds finds a warm, quick response in the human heart.

Antropov loved the river. He had been born and bred on it, and he knew every inch of it from the upper reaches to the delta, knew it at all seasons of the year and at every hour of the day and night, had seen it tumultuous and peaceful, ice-bound and rushing in wild boisterous spate. But most of all did he love it at this glamorous hour of summer dawn.

Gently dipping his oars in the rosy water, Antropov propelled the sharp-nosed wherry downstream. His bare feet were braced against a wet thwart, his shirt was open at the throat, and his eyes sparkled with pleasure.

When the chairman and the Party Secretary arrived at the fishing-grounds, the men of the second team were

already casting the seine. The young fishermen, looking like wrestlers in their shorts and tarpaulin straps, stood jingling their short chains, waiting for the boat warp. A light boat in which Stepan Khudyakov lay supporting the seine, glided along the line of dark floats. Two girls, Irina and Tosya, were bustling around a sooty cauldron, fanning the fire. A little farther off another group of half-naked fishermen, with jokes and laughter, were slowly dragging the shore-line across the sand.

"Hey, you in the boat!" Antropov shouted. "Put your beef on the oars! Have you gone blind? Can't you see the net's drifting? Get a move on!"

The oars in the seine-boat began working faster. Within five minutes the fishermen standing on the bank caught the straps of the boat wing of the seine.

The thud of a boat engine came from the right bank.

"That's Comrade Zubov," said one of the fishermen, shading his eyes. "He comes down to look at every haul."

The inspector's white *Sterlet* shot out into midstream amid a swirl of foam, described a semicircle near the dam, and raced down towards the fishing-grounds. The motor-man stopped the boat a little to one side so as not to interfere with the work. Zubov and Professor Shchetinin stepped ashore. They greeted the fishermen and sat down on Shchetinin's old rain-coat, which he spread out on the sand.

The fishermen were drawing in the seine. Stepan Khudyakov, in wet blue shorts and cross-barred shirt, stood knee-deep in the water, watching the approaching purse round which the water fairly boiled from the commotion set up by the enmeshed fishes. Two fishermen ran empty barges up towards the seine. The nearer the purse was drawn to the shore, the closer the fishermen pressed around it.

"Sort the fish out into the barges!" Stepan commanded.

Antropov nudged Mosolov, who sat smoking with a preoccupied air. "You watch the new team-leader sort out the fish, Kuzma Fedorovich. That's where the secret lies—in the sorting."

The fishermen, bending over the purse, swiftly and dexterously loaded the catch into the barges. Heavy sheat-fish, carps, and breams fell to the bottom one after another. There was a sharp tang of fresh fish and water-weeds in the air.

The fishermen, with a glance at Stepan, threw all the young fishes back into the river. Hundreds of nimble little fishes, their scales gleaming, dropped into the water. They lingered by the bank and then, with a sudden sense of acquired freedom, vanished into the depths.

"Have a good time till next spring," the fishermen laughed as they shook heaps of under-sized fishes out of the net. "Mind you don't get caught again!"

"Easier there, lads!" Stepan shouted. "Don't chuck them about, they're not stones, they're live fishes. You'll knock the wind out of them and they'll float down the river like bits of wood."

"Hear that, Kuzma?" Antropov winked to Mosolov. "Now that's a Soviet fisherman for you. He's not your Pimen. A man like this sees right down to the root of things, handles his job like a thrifty master."

"Yes, but how much short of the quota will he be?" Mosolov said with a wry smile.

"Don't you worry, he'll catch up after a while," Antropov said calmly. "He's not one to let things drift."

2

Irina and Tosya moved a basket up to the purse and began picking out fish for soup. The young fishermen gave the girls a hand, throwing the biggest breams and carps into the basket. Antropov, noticing this, went

over to the girls, his bare feet sinking deep into the cool sand.

"You won't make good *ukha* out of these fish, my girls!" he said disparagingly.

"Which ones should we use, then, Uncle Arkhip?" Irina asked.

"Humph!" Antropov said with a smile. "Your young man is team-leader, but he hasn't taught you anything, I see. Here, you cooks, dump that fish out of the basket. I'll show you how to cook a real fisherman's *ukha* at a camp-fire."

He quickly began to fill the basket with fat roaches, sterlets, and small breams, and threw in half a dozen daces and several barbels.

"Small fish give you just the right *ukha* flavour," he said. "They make a richer broth than big fish and smell better."

While the fishermen were shooting the second net, Irina and Tosya, under Antropov's direction, cooked the *ukha*. Antropov did not allow the girls to wash the gutted fishes in the water. He merely dashed some water over them and dropped them into the cauldron.

After the second cast, the fishermen seated themselves in the shade of the poplars, got their bread, bowls, and spoons out of their lunch-bags, and began breakfasting. The guests—Shchetinin, Zubov, Mosolov, and Antropov—were invited to join the circle. Hot *ukha* steamed in the bowls standing on the sand.

Only he who has been at the fishing-grounds knows what real *ukha* is. It is not the fish soup cooked on an electric range in a restaurant and served in a white china tureen. Real *ukha* is cooked in a black sooty cauldron with freshly caught fish which has not had time to lose the tang of the river. It is cooked with young potatoes, with green sorrel, which imparts a pleasantly acidulous flavour, with juicy tomatoes cut in halves to colour the

rich broth, and with onions and pepper which draw the tears from your eyes. And if, in addition, the smoke of the camp-fire faintly flavours the amber-coloured fat floating in the pot, then a tired man, coming out of the water, stretching his limbs in the shade of the poplar-trees, and helping himself from the pot with an earthenware bowl and a wooden spoon, will indeed be eating real *ukha*.

Antropov was pleased with the *ukha*. He ate little himself, but glanced with unconcealed pleasure at the fishermen who kept handing Irina their empty bowls and asking for more. Talking with the fishermen over breakfast, Antropov remarked that they had been rather careless in casting the net: they did not make allowance for the speed of the current, with the result that they not only wasted time but lost part of the fish.

"Of course it's a good thing that you spare the young fishes and turn them back into the river," he said. "But you also have a catch plan to fulfil. You managed it easier with Talalayev because he used to rake everything out of the net from a sturgeon to a lobster. But you handle the job more thriftily, you don't kill off the young, but sort them out, and that takes time. What you've got to do is make more casts, and, if necessary, organize night fishing. Get me?"

"Why, yes, Uncle Arkhip! A fellow can't tumble to everything right away. It takes experience and time."

"Exactly," Antropov concurred. "But our kolkhoz can't wait until you fellows gain experience. It has to fulfil its obligations to the state, and you boys are trailing along at the tail-end."

"The Sudachi folks have beaten us already," Mosolov threw in gloomily. "It's a shame, really. They raise the flag every evening, while we can't manage the daily plan."

He glanced at Tosya Belyavskaya, who was sitting nearby, and turned towards her.

"The second team is mostly made up of Komsomol members, but all the Komsomol Secretary does is cook *ukha*. It's high time you got your folks together and had a talk with them."

"I shouldn't say she's doing so well with the *ukha* either," Antropov said, smiling. "But never mind, we'll help her. Is that right, Tosya?"

"I had a talk with the Komsomol members, Arkhip Ivanovich," Tosya said, colouring. "We haven't time to hold meetings—folks are working in different places—but I talked to them one by one. We've already decided to ask Comrade Mosolov for permission to do night fishing."

Antropov nodded approval. "That's right. And we'll help you, Tosya. We'll send two or three old fishermen down from my team for the night, get some lanterns, and fix up a shelter on the bank."

He slapped Stepan Khudyakov, who was lying next to him, on the back. "Well, why don't you say something, Comrade team-leader? Maybe you object to night fishing?"

"No, why should I? But this team's going to do its monthly quota in the daytime, like the first team's doing. Night fishing will do at a pinch——"

He broke off and stood up. "Come along, boys, let's shoot the net."

Three minutes later a heavy seine-boat was speeding across the river, shooting the seine which had dried in the sun. A low wherry slipped along the line of bobbing floats with Stepan in it, running his hand along the head line. Mosolov and Antropov left for the fishing-grounds under the lock. The girls on the bank were washing up the dishes. Zubov and Shchetinin were left by themselves.

The professor screwed his eyes up against the blinding glare of the sun thrown back by the river.

"Did you hear that, Zubov?" he said. "Sparing the fish young. . . . That's the f-first and most important sign of the n-new psychology. Man the Destroyer is disappearing for g-good. The new Creative Man has come to take his place."

He blinked and added: "I met your fiancée to-day—she's busy with the new hatchery. Asked me all about the apparatuses. Nice girl."

Vasili was pleased to hear Shchetinin call Grunya his fiancée.

"Golubovskaya Stanitsa is the most suitable place for a fish hatchery," Shchetinin said, watching the seine being paid out. "It's situated midway on the river and can be linked with both the upper reaches and the delta, allowing passage to the fish both ways."

"But there will be dams upstream and downstream," Zubov remarked discreetly. "This system of hydraulic works will coop the fish up in confined areas."

"What f-fish?"

"The fish from the hatcheries and the future fish farms, for one thing."

Shchetinin sighed. He pushed his glasses up to his forehead and gazed into the soft azure of the deep clear sky.

"D'you remember, Zubov," he said in a low voice, "I once spoke to you about not wanting to d-die? I said that b-because an old dream of mine, a very old dream, is coming true. I'm old, my friend, very old. I have knocked about all the rivers of our country and seen fish disappearing year by year. It wasn't until after the Revolution that l-life took the new turn I had been d-dreaming of. Free man became a creator. You say the d-dams will coop the fish up in confined spaces. But do you realize what our f-fish husbandry will look like within the next few years?"

Shchetinin propped himself up on his elbow and

brought his wrinkled unshaven face closer to Vasili's. "The fish will f-fly by air to any place we want it to. We'll have s-specially equipped hydroplanes for transporting the fertilized spawn, young fishes, and b-brood stock. We'll breed the finest species of f-fish at our hatcheries—sturgeon, b-beluga, carp, sterlet, salmon, and trout. We'll plan everything in our economy, including the periods of spawn ripening. You know the p-pituitary injection method, don't you? I hope you understand what it means for us? Do you know that Soviet ichthyologists have acclimatized fishes in the Caspian Sea which have never been there from the day of creation? You have read, I suppose, that splendid b-bream farms have been organized in the d-delta of the Volga. D'you know what this means, my friend? It means we are ch-changing the face of the earth and the water and c-controlling them for man's benefit."

Shchetinin got out of his pocket a tin caviar-box in which he kept his tobacco, rolled himself a short cigarette, and stuck it into his holder, then proceeded with a sidelong glance at Vasili: "I'll let you into a s-secret, Zubov. I'm in the mood for confidences to-day."

He wreathed himself in smoke. "You must have been wondering why I'm s-staying on so long in Golubovskaya. My expedition's finished, we've transplanted two hundred belugas across the dam, and yet I'm still sitting here."

"I thought you were waiting for news from upstream, Ilya Afanasievich," Zubov said timidly, "to see how the belugas behaved on the other side."

"That's so," Shchetinin nodded. "But that's not the whole story. As a matter of fact, I'm s-studying the grain and vegetable crops of the collective farm here."

"What?" Vasili was astonished. "What for?"

"I'll t-tell you what for. . . ."

The old man began to speak in a low solemn voice, as though he were taking an oath. He did not seem to be

paying any attention to Zubov and stared out into the distance where, beyond the stanitsa, the boundless flood meadow lay yellow and sun-scorched.

"In the not too distant f-future the work of the fisherman and the farmer will be linked together," Shchetinin said. "In two or three years we'll start building fish farms. They'll be v-vast areas of two or three thousand acres on the flood meadow, enclosed by fairly high earthworks. The water will be run down there by special canals, forming a regular flow. But we'll need that water only in the spring when the fish farms will be full of young fishes. After we let the water out into the river together with the fingerlings, the grounds will be free until the next filling of water and spawning fish, in other words, until the next spring. That is where the collective farmers come in. It seems to me that they can help us b-build up feed stocks for our fish. They can cultivate such crops on the fish-farm plots as will impregnate the soil with substances which the fishes need. Of course, they will raise splendid crops of vegetables on the irrigated land and gather them for their collective farm."

Shchetinin turned to Zubov. "Possibly they will call these f-fields 'water fallow.' What do you think? We have 'bare fallow' and 'green fallow' in agriculture, and now we'll have 'water fallow.' Good, isn't it? Water fallow! Well then, the farmers will gather their harvest and leave the soil generously supplied with nitrogenous substances. But the fish also need green fodder. And here we can work out a system for s-sowing useful perennial grasses on the water fallow. The farmers will f-feed their animals with them, and we'll feed the fish. Afterwards, perhaps, young agriculturists will come along and build up a theory of c-combined farming and fish-breeding on irrigated flood lands. These young scientists, whom I won't live to see, will call themselves not agriculturists,

but, I should imagine, agro-ichthyologists. That's the problem I'm working on just now," Shchetinin finished quietly. "And that's the s-secret I told you about. No, I shouldn't like to die. Not just yet."

Vasili, deeply moved, laid his hand on the old man's arm. "We can't afford to lose you, Ilya Afanasievich. Why, this thing you've conceived should make you want to live and live, really it should!"

"Yes, these days one must think of living, not dying."

Shchetinin was so taken with the idea of a water fallow for joint pisci- and agriculture, that he converted his room in Grandpa Shrimp's house into a kind of headquarters where people gathered every evening.

Its most frequent visitors were Bugrov and Litvinov, the whiskered agriculturist from the machine and tractor station. The latter, tanned dark by the steppe sun, listened respectfully to the professor and said to Bugrov in his rich bass: "We must go in for ducks and geese, Zakhar Petrovich. Raise them on the new reservoirs by the thousand. The kolkhoz will make a good income on them!"

"Won't they destroy the young fishes, though?" Bugrov said doubtfully. "We'll be breeding one thing and killing off the other."

Litvinov dismissed the objection with an airy gesture.

"Don't you worry. We'll pick special feed for your ducks and geese on the fish farm. We'll cultivate a plant that will serve equally well for the fishes and the birds."

"The assortment of feedstuffs that will be cheap and nutritive still has to be studied," Shchetinin gravely observed. "For that purpose we'll have to study the fish breeds we have selected for cultivation, consult the poultry-keepers, and investigate the fodder of geese and ducks in closed reservoirs of the lake type."

Almost every evening they planned and sketched, drew up various schemes, interviewed Bugrov's poultry-farm girls, and chatted with the old fishermen.

Grandpa Shrimp met the evening visitors at the gate with an air of solemnity, as if he were already running the future fish farm. He brought chairs out for them, and seating himself sedately at the professor's side on the porch steps, listened to the talk of the farmers. When the conversation turned on fish, Grandpa Shrimp would clear his throat and launch into a long discourse on the habits of the pike-perch or the carp.

The farmers and fishermen were inclined to be sceptical of Shchetinin's scheme at first, regarding it as a needless novelty, but they warmed to it as time went on and enthusiastically discussed the unheard-of type of new combined economy, supplementing the professor's project with valuable suggestions and advice.

"Don't forget to write down those ducks of the Chinese breed," Kuprianovna, the old poultry-keeper, admonished Shchetinin. "They're heavier than geese and very profitable."

"If the fish farm's going to have ready water, why, we could grow rice and cabbage all over the place," the women gardeners day-dreamed. "We might even have a go at cotton or some other irrigated crop."

"On land like that we could raise anything you like," the old men nodded. "Things are going to be done on a grand scale, by the looks of it."

After one such gathering, when the professor was still jotting down some notes, Grandpa Shrimp, with a little yawn, said reflectively: "Yes, Ilya Afanasievich, I've lived in this world for seventy years and have never seen anything like it. The Minister gives a gold watch to my grandson. Arkhip Antropov, who I knew as a nipper, is Party leader in the stanitsa. Why, even the women, in the name of wonder, are wise on politics and offer advice to learned men like you. Now, how d'you make that out?"

And without waiting for Shchetinin's reply, the old man answered himself:

"Folks have changed, that's what it is. They're not what they used to be. As for the young people, they fly about on wings, there's no keeping up with them. They think up one thing after another, and every one of them considers himself important. That's as it should be, of course—every working-man in our country is looked up to. Yes, that's our way of life now...."

3

The fishermen began building the hatchery before the harvest. The collective farm allotted the fishing kolkhoz a most convenient plot on the high bluff of the river next to the vineyards. Work was actually started in the middle of June, when the fishermen carted up a hundred and twenty cartloads of stone for the foundation. Mosolov had gone up to town by launch with his book-keeper and came back towing a barge loaded with excellent building timber. True, Mosolov had a good deal of trouble in obtaining a delivery order for timber, nails, cement, and glass, for the fish hatchery had not been included in the plan, and the Fishery Consumers' Society had at first flatly refused to issue any building materials whatever. Mosolov had been obliged to apply to the Regional Party Committee, whose Secretary had telephoned the Regional Planning Committee and made arrangements for the Golubovskaya hatchery to be supplied with all the requisite materials out of emergency stocks.

The Secretary, after questioning Mosolov about the affairs of the fishing kolkhoz, got up from his desk and took a turn about the room with a thoughtful air.

"Your hatchery, of course, can't be considered the sole and chief undertaking in the matter of fish stock replenishment," he said. "It's not merely a question of the hatchery. The main thing under our conditions is rigid

regulation of fishing, preservation of stocks, and active measures for saving the fish young of the industrial species."

He halted by the arm-chair in which Mosolov was sitting and suddenly asked: "Am I right, Comrade Mosolov?"

"Why, yes," Mosolov said, somewhat taken aback. "That's just what I've been telling our inspector—it's no use messing about with this hatchery, it's like pouring water into a sieve, but he——"

"Wait a minute," the Secretary gently interrupted him. "The hatchery can not only serve as a sound and practical argument in favour of intensive fish-breeding, but it can benefit the whole of our economy. Hundreds of steppe farms have begun to build artificial ponds. What do you think, ought we to breed fish in these ponds or not?"

"Why, yes."

"I think so, too," the Secretary said, growing animated. "And that's where your hatchery could be of great service."

"Well, yes, I suppose it could be of help to the steppe farms," Mosolov muttered in confusion. "I've been thinking about that for some time...."

"There, you see. You must push on with it, then. You're getting the building materials, you have the labour, and specialists will help your kolkhoz to get things running."

The Secretary bade Mosolov good-bye, saw him to the door, and said: "We'll send fishermen down to your hatchery in the spring to see what you're doing and take a leaf out of your book."

Mosolov answered loudly, so that all in the waiting-room could hear: "Please do. The fish hatchery will be ready this year."

The Golubovskaya folk decided to build the hatchery themselves. The blue-prints were ordered in town and endorsed by the Fisheries Trust. There was nothing complicated about them, and the fishermen adopted a resolution to put in a hundred hours' work per man on the construction.

Every morning before sunrise, fishermen from all over the stanitsa who happened to be disengaged hurried towards the building site, carrying their lunches in bags and baskets. Later, when they had milked and fed the cows, the women, too, came out to work on the site.

All day long, from dawn till dusk, the banks of the river resounded with the rasping of saws, the ringing of axes, and the swish of planes. The bricklayers were finishing the foundation. Their sharp hammers struck showers of sparks out of the masonry and their work-coarsened hands dexterously smoothed the cement spillings.

The carpenters planed every beam and log, and mounds of odorous shavings rose around them. Not waiting until the log walls were run up, they started making the doors and window-frames, and the broad racks for the fish-breeding apparatuses.

Grunya Prokhorova practically never left the building site. Clad in a faded blue sports shirt with sleeves rolled up above the elbows, a short blue skirt smeared with lime and cement, and gym shoes on her bare feet, she ran from bricklayers to carpenters, kept an eye on the navvies who were digging a big basin, examined every lot of bricks delivered from the district centre, found time to visit the women who were sifting sand and to shout at the boys who had volunteered to straighten out crooked nails. She was flustered and as busy as a bee but her eyes sparkled and her tanned face glowed with happiness.

"Grunya feels herself a regular director," the fishermen laughed.

"Naturally. *She* started the ball rolling."

"All this building is for her, in a manner of speaking."

Mentally, Grunya had built the hatchery long ago. She often dreamt of it—a wonderful house, spotlessly clean, with fairy-like windows of bright green, yellow, and blue glass. Grunya wanted the millions of baby fishes born in that house to see the world in the same greenish-yellow light in which they would have seen it in the depths of their river-home. She wanted tub plants, flowers, and trees to grow in the vast rooms as they did on the banks of the river, the air to be fragrant with moist grass, and velvety water-weeds to sway in the basins and nurse-ponds.

As in a waking dream, Grunya saw the gleaming white enamelled ice-boxes, the water and air thermometers, the electric heaters running along the racks, and the soft carpet-strips on the floor. She could almost hear the hum of the powerful ventilating-fans resembling the sound of a spring wind, and the soft babble of the water in the apparatuses.

Now the dream was coming true: all the stanitsa was building the hatchery.

The hatchery was responsible for a reconciliation between Grunya and Vasili. After the incident in which the under-inspector was involved, Grunya did not meet Vasili for a fortnight, holding him to blame for what had happened.

"You ought to have listened to me," she had told Vasili at the time. "I knew all along that Dad ought to be dismissed and that you were wrong in keeping him on the job."

Pity for her father and resentment against Vasili preyed long on Grunya's mind, but all this was forgotten as soon as construction work got under way. Now all her thoughts were for the hatchery. She gave Professor Shchetinin no peace, asking him hundreds of questions,

and in the evenings when she met Vāsili, she would cry rapturously: "Oh, Vasya, things will be different now in the kolkhoz, won't they?"

"They will!" Zubov agreed. "We're starting a new job, and it will have an immediate influence on the people's work attitude."

"We'll have our own pools and a laboratory now," Grunya said eagerly. "Kuzma Fedorovich has promised to buy microscopes, cameras, and chemical vessels. And our pisciculturists will go about in white overalls, won't they?"

"Yes, darling, they will!" Vasili laughed.

The opening of the hatchery was fixed for the first of August. Grunya hung a calendar over her bedside and tore a leaf off every morning, asking her father: "Do you think they'll manage it by the first, Dad?"

Prokhorov (he had recently been given a job as weigher in the curing-shop) was inured to these questions.

"Looks as if they will," he said rather uncertainly. "People are tackling the job seriously. If only the weather doesn't interfere. . . ."

The weather, however, did not seem inclined to play shabby tricks with Grunya. There had been only three brief rainfalls with violent thunder and vivid rainbows across the Donets at the beginning of the summer, followed by hot settled weather in the daytime and warm starry nights.

More and more people came down to the site as the work progressed. Even Grandpa Yona, leaning on his cherry-wood stick, came ambling down to the bank where he sat down on a log, listened to the clang and clatter, and mumbled appreciatively: "Team-work's the thing."

The hardest part of the job—the foundation and the preparation of the timbers—was finished, and the bricklayers were already lining the pools adjoining the hatchery, while the carpenters had started to run up the

walls. The women's teams were plastering the cellar and the plinths and filling the spaces between the lower and upper floorings with sawdust and reed mats. Three old men—one of them, Fedot Kuzovlev, had once worked as a glazier—were putting in the window-panes.

Mosolov, on Grunya's insistence, had managed to procure some stained glass in town. True, there was only enough of it for the southern windows, but it was sufficient to protect the future young fishes against the dazzling sunlight. This glass worried Grunya—the way old Kuzovlev manipulated his ancient diamond-cutter made her jittery.

"Oh, do be careful, Fedot Prokofievich," she implored the old man. "If you break that glass my baby fishes won't forgive you."

"All right, lassie, all right, don't nag," old Fedot growled. "Anyone would think I'd never cut glass before."

The hatchery walls rose with amazing speed. Men and women worked without a moment's rest, and even casual passers-by who stopped to admire the new building did not remain passive spectators. Picking up a disengaged spade, axe, or rake, they fell to work digging a ditch for the water-pipes, cutting down the black-thorn thickets, or raking together the shavings and wood chips littered all over the site.

Every day Grunya tore the leaf off the calendar with a beating heart, and asked everyone she met: "Do you think we'll manage it by the first?"

By all signs the hatchery would be finished by the first of the month. Mosolov, a fortnight in advance, sent invitations to town and the neighbouring fishing kolkhozes for the opening ceremony. However, an unforeseen circumstance upset the plans of the Golubovskaya fishermen.

One evening the Secretary of the District Party Committee arrived in the stanitsa. Not waiting for old Avdei to ferry his dusty motor car across to the right bank, Nazarov got into a fisherman's boat, crossed the river, and strode off to the collective-farm office.

All who saw the Secretary that evening noticed that he looked worried. He walked down the foot-path running across the island with bent head, nodding silently to the women working on the vegetable plots.

"Tikhon Filippovich looks angry," the villagers said to one another.

Nazarov had serious cause for anxiety. The spring flood had cluttered up the fields of the Golubovskaya collective farm with alluvial sand and silt. The farm, as a result, was late with the grain harvesting and, besides, was in a pretty bad fix, since the unreaped winter wheat was likely to spill in this hot dry weather.

That night Nazarov called a joint Party meeting of the fishing kolkhoz, the dam and lock workers, and the Poplar Wood forestry section. It started late, because the fishery Communists were working in different teams out on the lakes and on the river, and the forestry workers were scattered in different parts of the nursery.

"The collective farm is unable to cope with the harvesting," Nazarov tersely informed the Communists. "Nearly a thousand acres of wheat are standing in the fields unreaped."

He paused, running his eye over the benches. The people sat in silence.

"Unless the wheat is harvested before the week is out it will be ruined," Nazarov went on. "I have called you together to discuss the situation, Comrades. We've got to mobilize all our forces and help the farm harvest the crop."

An oil-lamp flickered dully on the table. Greenish midges swarmed round the hot smoky chimney-glass and dropped scorched on the ink-stained red cloth. The people in the hall were silent.

Nazarov stuck his thumbs into his belt and turned towards Engineer Akimenko, the lock master.

"What do you say, Victor Dmitrievich?"

Akimenko, caught by surprise, looked up and answered:

"I say the grain has to be harvested, of course."

"That's understood," Nazarov said with a gesture of annoyance. "You tell us how many people you're going to send out to the field."

The lock master, after a moment's thought, said quietly, looking into the dark hall: "We'll send about twenty, and I think the guards' chief could be persuaded to send some of the guards who are off duty."

"How many?"

"We can send about ten men, Tikhon Filippovich," the guards' chief said.

The forestry representatives promised to give forty men for the harvesting.

Nazarov went up to Antropov and said with a note of concern: "What about you, Arkhip Ivanovich? We rely chiefly on your fishery. You have a lot of people there. Isn't that so? Then why don't you speak up?"

"I will, Comrade Nazarov," Antropov said, getting up.

He came out from behind the table and started speaking, alternately addressing the hall and the Secretary of the D.P.C.

"We have a lot of people, that's true. But they're engaged on a big job. We're building a hatchery and are going to breed millions of young fishes. Our fishermen have pledged themselves to finish the hatchery by the 1st of August. It looks as if our plans are going to be upset now——"

"That's clear. But what do you think about the spilling wheat?" Nazarov interrupted him.

His tone was deliberately brusque, but his face showed that he was sorry for Antropov, who tarried with his reply, and for the fishermen, who would have to put off the building work to harvest the wheat. He added quietly, trying to soften his tone: "We'll hear what you have to say about the hatchery afterwards. Tell us now what's to be done to save a thousand acres of wheat."

Nazarov realized how difficult it was for Antropov to drop construction work and throw the fishermen into the field, but Antropov nevertheless said what he was expecting him to say.

"It's a pity, of course, but we'll have to drop the job for about a fortnight. It's up to the fishery to help save the crop. We'll all go out into the field to-morrow."

At these words Mosolov ran out on to the platform without asking permission to speak and shouted: "So grain is important in your opinion, and fish isn't? Is that it? They've been sleeping and letting things slide, and now we've got to help them!"

He turned on Nazarov an angry flushed face and said in a suppressed voice: "You won't have my consent, Tikhon Filippovich, not while I'm chairman of the fishery. We have our own obligations towards the state. Our fishery business——"

"Hold on, Mosolov!" Zhigayev, the chairman of the rural Soviet, said angrily. "Harping on your fishery all the time! As if there's no such thing as a socialist system. Haven't you ever heard of that outside your blessed fishery?"

"You needn't throw that into my face, Zhigayev," Mosolov said with a nervous twitch of his game arm. "I lost my hand in the battle-field, fighting for socialism, and if need be I'd have given the head off my shoulders. As for the fishery, I'm responsible for it before the Party,

and I'm not going to have it chased up a tree. Our folk have volunteered to build a hatchery which is a useful thing for the whole region. They're working hard and conscientiously day and night—even the old men have come out to work—and now you want to throw them off and cover up other people's bungling with their work. . . .”

“Just look at him!” Bugrov threw out. “He looks on his fishery as if it was his private estate and argues like a landlord's steward—this is yours and this is mine! If Comrade Mosolov had taken a good-neighbourly interest in the affairs of the farm, he'd have seen that this isn't a case of bungling but a natural calamity.”

“What does he care for your farm!” someone said with a laugh. “His fishery's the hub of the universe.”

“Wait a minute, Comrades,” Nazarov said. “We've got to get this straight.”

The Secretary stroked his greying hair with a weary gesture and said to Mosolov: “Come over here, Kuzma Fedorovich, here's a vacant chair.”

Mosolov complied and sat down next to him.

“I'm listening, Tikhon Filippovich,” he said.

Nazarov, after a thoughtful pause, asked: “When do you intend to finish building the hatchery?”

“By the first of August.”

“And then what?”

“What do you mean?”

“What are you going to do at the hatchery after it has been built? Are you going to start operating it at once?”

“No,” Mosolov said, frowning. “We'll start work later.”

“When exactly?”

“The busiest time will be next spring.”

“And until then?”

“Until then we'll carry out preparatory work, install the apparatuses and one thing and another. . . .”

Nazarov laid his hand calmly on Mosolov's shoulder. "So that if you finish the construction, say, by the 15th of September instead of the 1st of August, your plans will not be upset? Is that so?"

"No, the plans won't be upset," Mosolov said, scratching his head. "But we've invited the guests for the opening and people are waiting——"

"That's a pity, of course," Nazarov said gravely, "but obviously, to save the wheat, you'll have to apologize to your guests and put off the celebration."

Antropov stood up, stroking his thick beard.

"If you ask me, there's nothing to discuss," he said, glancing at Mosolov. "Work won't start until the spring, and we could build five such hatcheries in the meantime. We never had any building schedule—the fishermen just fixed the time themselves and are eager to keep their word. Being Soviet people, we're bound to take into consideration this natural calamity on the farm's fields and come to the help of the collective farmers."

"Hear, hear!" cries arose.

The Secretary of the D.P.C. got up and looked into the hall where the bronzed faces of the men showed dimly through a pall of tobacco smoke.

"The Golubovskaya farm is to blame, of course, for not having considered the difficulties of harvesting on its flooded fields," he said. "We can't turn the combines into those fields; they'll have to be reaped by horse-drawn reapers, but the farm is short-handed. It's our duty to help the farm in saving the crop. Isn't that so? We Communists can't sit on the fence, we can't refuse help to the collective farmers. We can't very well sit back and watch hundreds of tons of wheat going to waste before our eyes, can we? We've got to decide right now in what way we can help the collective farm, which has suffered from the flood."

Next morning Mosolov and Antropov held a short

meeting at the building site. The fishermen decided to postpone the opening of the hatchery for a fortnight in order to help the collective farmers with the harvesting. This decision was not taken at once, however, as Grunya Prokhorova, followed by five or six fishermen, flatly refused to quit the building site. Not until Antropov had a separate talk with her did Grunya agree that it was her Komsomol duty to carry out the decision of the Party meeting and go out into the field.

"Don't worry, Grunya," Antropov said kindly, "we'll finish your hatchery."

In addition to those engaged on the building site the fishermen told off Grandpa Shrimp's net team for work on the collective farm.

Even Pimen Talalayev agreed to help with the harvesting, and merely asked not to be put on heavy work.

Yegor Talalayev, the lock electrician, was put on carting out the grain. In the evening he called out his crony Trifon and together they held a long consultation. At the end of it Yegor said to old Avdei, who was sitting out on the porch: "Well, Dad, we're going to shoot the net tonight right at Luchkovaya."

"Have you gone batty or what?" the ferryman said, startled. "Luchkovaya's right next to Talovaya. Stepan Khudyakov and his team are fishing there day and night and the inspector sleeps there. Mind they don't catch you!"

"No fear," Yegor said. "We'll line our pockets for a whole year—one shot'll do the trick. There's a seine at Anisya's place in the hamlet, the one they sent down from Novaya Stanitsa for repairs."

"How are you going to drag it out? You'll want fifteen men for the job."

"The oxen'll do it," Yegor chuckled. "The oxen at our lock are as strong as devils. Besides, Trifon's going to give me a hand with the co-op oxen. Get me?"

The farm fields of which the D.P.C. Secretary had spoken lay on sloping hill-sides, flood-meadow ridges, and patches of rising ground which could barely be distinguished on the level line of the valley between the rivers. The spring flood waters, moving down the hollows and depressions, flowed round these slight elevations, which stood out like green islands in a sea of blue. In some places, however, the water reached the heights; finding any loop-hole—a hollow, a gully, or even wheel-ruts—it ran there first in a thin trickle, then in a cheerfully chuckling rivulet, and after cutting a bed for itself in the yielding sandy soil, rushed along in a boisterous glittering torrent. Wherever the water passed, it left silt deposits, heaps of gravel, mounds of sand and eroded black earth.

Later, when the spate subsided and the river fell back into its banks, these pools and drifts, standing out darkly among the green crops like gaping wounds, were overgrown with rank weeds, the seeds of which had been scattered by the spring winds.

Nevertheless, the winter wheat was not lost. Interspersed with pools, silt deposits, strips of weeds, and sand-drifts, and saturated with moisture, it sprouted fat heavy ears, filled the large vivid-yellow grain with rich sap, and, warmed by the hot sun, ripened and then began to wither.

No combine-operator, seeing this flood-scarred field dotted with man-high weeds, would have risked running his machine through it. Before he had gone a hundred yards he would tear the scythe, smash the header, and put the machine out of action.

That is why the Secretary of the D.P.C., after looking over all these fields, recommended reaping them with horse-drawn reapers. Only a simple manoeuvrable

machine like the reaper could twist and turn amid this chaos of flood drifts and wild weeds. But in order to harvest the crop quickly and without loss, binders, drivers, and other work-hands were needed. A field threshing-floor had to be prepared, a thresher and several winnows placed on it, and the grain delivered at once to the elevator and the farm barns.

On a bright Sunday morning, Grunya, not waiting until the sun was up, snatched a hasty breakfast and ran out into the field with a little bag containing her lunch. Villagers in carts and ox-waggon were hurrying out to the field along all the roads. Grunya overtook a team of mottled oxen drawing a long cart with a deep box. In the cart, joking and laughing, sat the lock workers, all young lads in black caps and faded blue overalls. Yegor Talalayev lolled among them with a switch in his hand.

Seeing Grunya, Yegor winked to his mates, swung his legs, shod in highly polished top-boots, over the side, and shouted: "Get in, Grunya, we'll give you a lift!"

The boys made room for her and she sat down in the cart.

"When's the wedding, Grunya?" Yegor said mockingly.

"What wedding?"

"Why, yours and Comrade Zubov's, of course."

Grunya made no reply. She turned her back on Yegor and spoke to an elderly workman in a khaki cap. Yegor winked to the boys again but kept silent the rest of the way.

They were among the first to arrive on the hill. Below, on the road, stood a long line of reapers. The oxen and horses were unharnessed and placed alongside the bales of pressed hay. Nearby burned two huge fires, around which the cooks in white kerchiefs bustled busily. One was Elena Makeyeva, a handsome middle-aged widow, one of the best workers on the collective farm. The

other was Marfa Sazonova. With sun-tanned arms bared to the elbow, Marfa was deftly cutting cabbage on a board and throwing handfuls of it into the boiling cauldron. Animated and rosy, with wisps of fair hair showing from under her kerchief, she was saying something to Makeyeva and smiling, while the latter glanced in Grunya's direction.

Villagers kept riding up to the field camp. Bugrov split them up into teams, allotted work sections to them, and told them what they had to do.

When the sun rose all nine reapers were put to work in the field. To ensure uniform speed, Bugrov had the horses harnessed to the reapers while the oxen were used for carting the sheaves up to the threshing-floor.

The sleek thoroughbred mares from the kolkhoz stud-farm, harnessed three abreast to the reapers, started off at a brisk steady pace, swinging their tails. They sailed down the golden sea like boats. The red wings of the reaper flashed in the air, the gear and knives started a whirling chorus, the half-naked men sitting on the little platforms swung their forks, and the first swaths of cut wheat fell upon the low stubble in even rows.

Women binders stood along each side of the windrow. Barefoot, with skirts tucked up high and their faces covered with white kerchiefs, they let the reaper pass, then bent over the swaths and swiftly and dexterously tied the heavy wheat with straw bands. The dry stalks of the straw flickered in the hands of the women, and the shapeless scattered swaths took the form of tight sheaves, which gay noisy girls immediately carried off and stooked in tall stacks. The drivers stowed the sheaves into the long box-carts drawn by oxen and carted them to the clattering threshing-machine.

There was a merry hubbub in the field, a medley of songs, neighing of horses, the whirr of the reapers, and the clatter of cart-wheels.

Grunya, her right shoulder pushed slightly forward, turned the handle of the winnower. Her mouth was parched and she panted for breath, streams of perspiration ran down her face and got into her eyes. But she could not stop, because little Irina was feeding grain into the tin jaws of the machine. Irina could not stop either, because the two laughing Komsomol boys of the lock guards, Ivan and Pasha, were carrying up the bags of grain and pouring them out on the ground next to her without a moment's rest. Ivan and Pasha trotted barefoot backwards and forwards between the thresher and the winnower, and the mound of grain kept growing and growing. Zakhar Bugrov, with square goggles over his eyes, had been working himself at the thresher since the morning. With a single movement of his hand he received the sheaves with the torn bands from the girls, spread the loosened rustling sheaf fanwise, and fed it into the growling jaws of the thresher. The scene around the thresher was one of bustle and activity. Red-haired old Yevsei Korolkov fussed about, catching the torrent of grain into bags; sturdy young stackers were building pyramids; and farther off worked the carters, the tractor-drivers, the weighers, the reapers, and the binders.

Grunya not so much saw as felt with all her being this team-work of the people scattered over the hill-side. Like the freckled Pasha, like Irina, like the tall Lyuba Bugrova, Bugrov himself, Grandpa Shrimp, and all the others working on the kolkhoz field, she felt this power and pride of human unity, the grandeur of this common toil for the common good.

The blinding sun blazed relentlessly over the steppe, the birds sought refuge from the heat among the thickets, the sides of the foam-flaked mares grew dark with sweat. Despite the heat, the work went on. The reapers moved backwards and forwards across the field, skirting the islands of tall weeds, and already a wide level strip of

stubble cut clean by the sharp knives stretched all across the hill-side.

In the afternoon Grunya was relieved at the winnower by Tosya Belyavskaya. Grunya pulled the dusty kerchief off her head, shook it, wiped her hot wet face with it, and walked over to the stubble, barely dragging her feet along. Her body ached with fatigue, her hands burned, and her ears tingled with the steady hum of the thresher and the winnower.

At the windrow of cut grain Grunya saw Marfa and Elena Makeyeva. Both women, their heads covered with garlands of green bindweed, were tying sheaves. Picking long stalks of wheat out of the swath and reinforcing them with grass, Marfa twisted bands and laid the swath on them, while Makeyeva, following behind, tied the ends of the bands round the sheaves which she pressed down with her bare knee. When the sheaf was tied, she kicked it aside and went on to the next.

"Tired, Grunya?" Marfa said kindly without looking up from her work.

"My arms ache," Grunya murmured.

"That's because you're not used to it," Makeyeva said.

Marfa went up to Grunya, smiling, and said: "Sit down, Grunya, get your wind back. Let's have a little rest together."

They sat down.

"A fine crop this year," Marfa said, glancing at the field.

Makeyeva, too, glanced at the big field and drew a deep breath.

"It is a fine crop," she said. "That's because folks put their hands to it. It was hard work that did it. Last year the earth here rested under bare fallow, we weeded it and harrowed it again and again, cleaned the seeds, then weeded the crop, gave it a dressing with dungwash water.

If it hadn't been for the flood, d'you know what a harvest we'd have got after putting in all that work!"

Makeyeva pulled the kerchief off her head, straightened her hair, and turned to Grunya. "With you fisher folk it's a different story," she laughed. "All you know is to catch fish. If there's fish to be had, all well and good; if there isn't any fish, there isn't, and that's that."

The women fell to discussing village news: what goods the co-op store was now selling, what vegetables folks were raising, and how the cucumbers, tomatoes, and cabbage in this or that kitchen-garden were coming along. Listening to this talk, Grunya pondered over Makeyeva's words. "It's true," she thought, "they work better than we do, and it's really time we came to our senses, because we're very bad masters."

Her next thought was that the fish hatchery would soon be built, and she and Vasili would start teaching the Komsomol fishermen how to handle the apparatuses, raise the young fishes, and establish a proper feeding regimen for them. They would teach others and learn themselves, and new people would grow up in the kol-khoz who would run the fishing business the way Elena Makeyeva ran things on the farm.

She no sooner thought of Vasili than Marfa moved up to her and said, peering into her eyes: "I suppose you will soon be taking my lodger away, Grunya?"

"I don't know what you mean, Marfa Panteleyevna," Grunya said, taken aback.

"Why, the whole stanitsa is talking about it. Grunya Prokhorova is going to marry the inspector, they say. You're going out with Vasili Kirillovich, so they say. And good luck to you! He's a nice man and he loves you. They've brought a little house down for him from town. It's a good house, I heard say. So there you are, you've got a little home ready for you."

"Let's get up, Marfa," Makeyeva interrupted her. "The boys are making the third round and we'll drop behind."

They rose and went forward to meet the approaching reapers.

Grunya got up too. Here, from the hill-top, she had a good view of the wisp of smoke curling over the tractor that stood by the thresher, the straw cocks glittering with gold under the sun, the ox-carts gliding through the steppe, the women binders strung out in a line all the way to the woods, and everything else that moved and worked on the hill-side that hot busy day.

And Grunya, as she looked at all this, breathing deeply of the soft breeze that was wafted up from the river, suddenly felt her fatigue vanish and her body tingle with a thrilling, revitalizing strength which seemed to emanate from the joyous fertile earth, the green trees, the bright sky, and all those people working on the blazing sun-drenched hill-side.

6

Towards the evening the train of farm carts returned from the district centre where the elevator was situated. Ivan Dyatlov, the leader of the transport team, who had charge of the grain deliveries, rode at the head of the train. The other twelve carts were strung out over the steppe for about a mile. The two last carts were far behind the others. On them rode Trifon and Yegor Talalayev. The team of powerful oxen belonging to the co-op store was harnessed to Trifon's cart, and Yegor was driving the team of young oxen belonging to the lock office.

Ivan Dyatlov, a tall young man in a faded jacket, glanced back uneasily and shouted to Ustin Slesarev, an old collective farmer riding behind him: "Yegor and Trifon are dragging behind all the time! We've got to make

another trip to-day, but they're moving like flies in a glue pot!"

"Trifon's front wheel looks kind of wobbly," Slesarev said. "He complained at the elevator that his spokes were busting one after the other."

"Stuff and nonsense!" Ivan said with an irritable gesture. "I checked up every cart in the morning, and there was nothing wrong with any of the spokes."

"I don't know, Ivan. But Trifon complained about the front left wheel."

"What about Yegor?"

"I think one of his oxen's gone lame, gravelled its foot or something."

Ivan spat in disgust and stretched himself out in the long box of the cart.

"Helpers, they call themselves! Worse than useless!"

Actually, Trifon and Yegor were dropping behind not because they could not catch up with the cart train, but because they were deliberately holding back the oxen.

"Let them go!" Yegor growled, watching the last cart disappear from view.

"What if anyone comes back to check up?" Trifon said.

"We won't wait until they do," Yegor said. "We'll turn off into the woods at the next bend. It's just about time, getting dark already."

They reached a gully, and urging on the oxen, turned left on to a grassy forest road.

A snip of moon shone over the blue-black thickets of the riverside woods. Water gurgled in a deep gully overgrown with pussy-willows and underbrush. Somewhere deep in the woods a wild duck quacked loudly. Two hares scampered across the path, stiff-eared with alarm.

"May you peg out, damn you!" Trifon swore.

"What's the matter?" Yegor's voice came out of the dark.

"Hares crossed our path—it's an unlucky sign."

"Tommy-rot for old women," Yegor laughed. "They won't turn us back!"

Trifon jumped down, threw the reins over the back of the front cart, and sat down beside Yegor.

"How about the net?" Trifon asked.

"Anisya promised to get it out into the wood in advance. Your brother's going to help her with it."

"What if we're missed at the field camp?"

"We'll say that some district chief stopped us on the way and made us drive down to the wharf to cart some spare parts to the MTS."

Yegor's design was simple and audacious—to cast the net under the very nose of the second fishing team, which was working at Talovaya, then drag it out by means of the oxen, cart the catch down to Atamansky hamlet during the night, and thence ship it up to town by the steamboat.

The place where Yegor intended to fish was about two hundred yards below Talovaya, at the bend of the river, and Avdei with his niece Anisya and Trifon's brother Semyon were to be waiting for them there to help cast the net.

Everything worked out as Yegor had planned. He and Trifon found the net which Anisya had hidden under the railings of the abandoned chapel, stowed it into the cart, drove round the camp-fires burning at the fishing-ground and drew up at the river bend. Anisya and Semyon were lying under a willow-tree on the bank, waiting for them.

The most difficult part was to bring up the seine-boat. Avdei undertook this. Waiting until nightfall, he got into the boat and rowed straight towards Talovaya. As the ferryman had expected, Zubov was there. He was sitting with the fishermen round the camp-fire, listening to Fedot's funny story about someone's wedding.

Avdei stopped the boat right next to the camp-fire, stepped ashore on the pretext of asking for a light, and hung about a bit.

"Ah, well!" he said with a sigh, glancing at Zubov. "Fedot's stories make good listening, but I've got to run down to the district wharf for bricks. I'll manage it downstream somehow, but how I'm going to row back, God alone knows. Couldn't you do an old man a good turn and take me in tow with the motor boat?"

"Not to-day, Avdei Gavrilovich," Zubov said. "I'll be going up to the district centre on Friday—if you can wait, I'll take you in tow."

The ferryman scratched his head thoughtfully. "I'm afraid this job can't wait. I suppose I'll have to row down to the brick-yard and ask someone there to lend me a hand."

With a demonstrative sigh the old fellow shambled back to the boat, got in, settled himself with a groan, and straining at the heavy oars, drove the boat downstream and soon disappeared in the darkness.

"Don't you worry, that old walnut will manage it," Fedot said with a chuckle. "He's just pretending to be an old dodderer, but he's as strong as the devil. All the Talalayevs are like that—it runs in the family."

"I don't know about the devil!" Vasili laughed. "He can barely drag his feet along."

It never occurred to Vasili, of course, that the old ferryman, Avdei Talalayev, who had struggled so pitifully with the heavy oars, had driven his boat out on a poaching errand.

Avdei ran the boat down to the bend where Yegor, Anisya, Trifon and his brother Semyon were waiting for him. Nearby one could see the camp-fires burning at the fishing-grounds and the black figures of the fishermen resting around them.

"Have they caught much out there?" Yegor asked.

"I don't know. I didn't look into their barges," Avdei said meekly. "I suppose they caught a lot, because they're all as jolly as can be."

"Is Zubov there?"

"Yes."

Yegor began to undress.

"I've unhitched the oxen," he said, nodding towards the woods. "Turned them out to graze, they're fagged out, you know. Ought to keep them closer so's they won't stray."

Semyon went to drive the oxen in, while Yegor and Trifon stowed the seine into the boat. Wearing only shorts, they shuffled round the rocking boat, panting with the exertion and conversing with each other in sibilant whispers.

Within a quarter of an hour they got into the boat and started to shoot the net. The rowlocks creaked faintly, the net vanished into the dark water with a swish, and the waves splashed softly against the sides of the boat. The stars twinkled in the sky like myriads of fireflies. No one interfered with the poachers that night. Hitching the end of the head line to the cart-pole, they harnessed the oxen, dragged the net out on the sandy bank, and carted the catch down to Atamansky hamlet during the night. There, at the house of Yegor's cousin, Anisya, a war widow, they sorted the fishes out, stowed them in baskets, and sized up the catch. It amounted to over twenty-five hundredweights of razor-fishes, pike-perches, breams, and carps, not counting fish fry.

"That's the way to fish," Yegor said complacently. "You people were just larking about, playing child's games, and called it fishing."

In the morning Anisya and Semyon salted part of the fish in four barrels, and the rest was shipped to the town market by steamer. Trifon and Yegor, after thoroughly cleaning the cart-boxes with sand, returned to the field

camp just before noon, when Ivan Dyatlov's transport team was making its third trip to the grain elevator.

"Where the devil have you been?" Bugrov pounced on Yegor. "Better no help at all than this kind of help. It's doing us more harm than good."

"It isn't our fault," Yegor snapped back. "Some regional agent or other stopped us on the way and made us drive down to the district wharf to cart spare parts out to the combines."

"What spare parts?"

"How do I know? They were packed up in cases."

"Where did you take them to?"

"We carted them all the way to Atamansky ravine and there a lorry took them from us."

Yegor looked insolently into Bugrov's face and spoke so coolly that the chairman believed what he said.

"All right!" Bugrov said with a gesture of annoyance. "Load up with grain at the third threshing-floor and cart it up to the elevator. We've got to finish these deliveries."

Yegor and Trifon went down to the threshing-floor as if nothing had happened, loaded grain into the cart-boxes, which smelt of fish, and drove out to the elevator.

Bugrov was in a hurry to complete grain deliveries because, during those hot busy days, his region had challenged the Ukraine, the Stavropol region, and the Kuban to emulation, and was delivering to the state millions of poods of the finest wheat.

Endless trains of carts and lorries loaded with grain moved along all the high-roads and country roads bound for the grain-collecting stations, leaving light clouds of dust in their wake. The flood of golden grain poured into the elevators day and night. The transports moved without a stop, while out in the sun-scorched steppe self-propelled combines, sheafers, reapers, smoking tractors, and humming threshers worked without a stop, too, and

the mounds of grain at the collective-farm threshing-floors grew higher and higher. There was a danger of the local transport not being able to cope with the delivery and housing of the grain before the rains started.

Thousands of brand-new cars—lorries of all sizes and pick-ups—raced down the roads. The drivers of the different town institutions—trusts, banks, stores, warehouses, printing-shops and factories—rode out into the steppe.

Caravans of barges, lighters, and hulks sailed up to the riverside elevators, and trains of covered freight cars rolled up to the steppe elevators, and the fragrant grain poured into them in an endless stream.

Teams, collective farms, districts, regions, and republics competed in the fields. The whole Soviet Union was gathering in its harvest.

On the seventh day the Golubovskaya collective farm completed the harvesting and delivered its quota to the state.

CHAPTER SIX

1

Towards the end of the summer the grapes ripened in the orchards and vineyards of the Don valley. Tied to tall wooden supports, the vines rose to twice the height of a man, and under the shadow of their palmate leaves touched with clinging blue-grey cobwebs, hung heavy sticky clusters of grapes oozing fine threads of juice. The pale-yellow "Ladan" grapes, the pride of the Don gardeners, gave off a faint refulgence, as if sunbeams were imprisoned in their fragrant skins.

On the steep bluff, where the buildings of the Golubovskaya winery loomed white behind the jetty, rows of big barrels stood six stories high. Their tightly hooped oak staves rang like iron, and the hand of the wine-maker was already tracing new figures on their dark bottoms. From the wide open folding doors came the gurgle of juice dripping into the vats and the smell of young wine hung over the bank.

Gay girls snipped the grapes off the vines from morning till night, put them into baskets, and carted them to the winery. There the girls were given different wines to taste, and they rode back laughing and singing Cossack songs in a chorus.

The girls were not the only ones who savoured the wine. Collective farmers, fishermen, lock workers, and

foresters brought their home-grown grapes to the winery, where the smiling wine-maker Nestor Antonovich, a phlegmatic Cossack with a glowing nose that proclaimed his profession from afar, hospitably treated his customers to young wine. Everyone drank with the unintoxicatable Nestor and came away with a slight lurch in his gait, humming a gay tune.

It was during those days that the Golubovskaya fishermen finished building the hatchery. Grunya's dream had come true at last. On the high bank of the river stood a tall slate-roofed house whose stained window-panes made rainbows out of the sunbeams.

Fishermen from upstream and downstream, representatives of the fishery authorities, the district Party organizations, and the neighbouring collective farms attended the opening. People walked along the gravel paths, examining the concrete-lined pools, the wooden nurseries, and the fish-breeding apparatuses.

After a brief meeting the hosts and guests broke up into groups and discussed their affairs. Not having a chance to speak to Grunya, who was surrounded by a crowd of girls, Vasili wandered aimlessly about the court-yard and joined a group of fishermen who were sitting on a log listening to Antropov.

Dressed in a clean shirt and a black jacket, Antropov mopped his perspiring face with a handkerchief.

"Looking at this hatchery reminds me of how we used to run things on the river in the old tsarist days," he said in a husky voice. "We fished in all the creeks and our catch was taken up by Mitronka Danilov. A very rich dealer he was. Folks said he had a hundred thousand in gold hidden away somewhere. Our gang sailed in Mitronka's boats and fished with his nets, so he just skinned us alive, paid us next to nothing for our fish. One spring—I remember it as if it was yesterday—the herrings were running strong. We landed them in heaps. Danilov

couldn't salt them quick enough—he ran short of barrels and salt. You'd think he'd lay off and let the shoals go upstream, but not he! No fear! 'Go on fishing,' he tells us, 'and bury them in the sand. Better let them rot in the sand than have the fish-dealers upstream get them. They'll only beat the prices down,' he says, 'and I'll lose good money on it.' ”

“D'you mean to say you buried them?” asked a young fisherman.

“Yes,” Antropov said with a gesture of disgust. “Dumped them out of the boats, shovelled sand over them, and left them to rot. There was a terrific stink all over the creeks that spring, I remember. But then Mitronka Danilov pocketed fifteen or twenty thousand on what he sold, because he was able to keep the price up. Yes, that's the way our fishers ran the business in those days.”

“Those days are gone for good, Arkhip Ivanovich,” Stepan Khudyakov said gravely.

“Yes, Stepan, they've gone for good,” Antropov nodded. “Gone with the muddy stream.”

Vasili stood smoking and listening to the fishermen, and the significance of what was taking place ashore was brought home to him with renewed force. The hatchery the Golubovskaya fishermen had built was merely a particle of that new element which was so powerfully weaving itself into the pattern of the stanitsa's life. Vasili became aware of a change even in the old fishermen. They no longer spoke only about fishing, but also about fish-breeding and the preservation of the fish young. “They are quite different people,” he thought. “No one will now bury hundreds of tons of herring in the sand for fear of competition—they are all working for a common cause and working better and better every day.”

It was not until evening, when the guests had departed, that Vasili and Grunya had a chance of being to-

gether. They laughed as they glanced at the night-watchman, the invalid Ignatyevich, dozing on the doorstep, and strolled about among the trees with their arms around each other.

Girls were singing in the vineyards behind the new pine-wood fence. Their ringing voices carried far over the roseate evening river. Two bickering old women under the bluff were carrying buckets on yokes and watering the late cabbages, which glimmered greenly on the plot. A yellow oriole flew out of the bushes. A jay wheeled over the gardens with a flash of brilliant blue plumage. On the spreading branches of the old apple-trees trembled flimsy gossamer—the harbinger of autumn.

“Well, Grunya, are you pleased?” Vasili said.

“Ever so much, Vasya!” the girl answered. “Now we’ll start work in earnest.”

She glanced at him out of the tail of her eye and suddenly asked: “Will you love me?”

Vasili drew her closer. “What should I love you for?”

He began kissing her, and she yielded to his caress, clinging to him with a happy smile, thinking of him, of herself, and of all that had happened in the stanitsa in the last few months. And although nothing particularly important had happened, Grunya felt that everything—this fish hatchery they had built, the parties of geologists, hydraulic engineers, and land surveyors working on the hills, and especially Vasili’s arrival, had brought something new and thrilling into her life, filled it with happiness and a new meaning.

“D’you know, Vasya,” Grunya said, looking up at Vasili from under puckered brows, “everyone in the stanitsa says we are going to marry.”

“Do they?” Vasili laughed. “I wonder who?”

“Oh, everybody. Wherever you go they keep on at it—‘When are you going to invite us to the wedding?’ I was going down to Peski with the lock boys, and Yegor

Talalayev kept pestering me—‘When are you and the inspector getting married?’—and winked at the boys as he said it. And again at Peski your landlady, Marfa, brought up the same subject. ‘I suppose you will soon be taking my lodger away, Grunya?’ she says.”

“Is that what she said?”

“Her very words.”

“What else did she say?”

“Nothing else. Just that you were a nice boy and loved me....”

“You know, Shchetinin calls you my fiancée, too,” Vasili said, stroking her hand.

“No, really?”

“My word of honour. Not long ago he said to me: ‘I met your fiancée to-day.’ ”

He laughed, but suddenly became grave and said softly: “Would you agree to become my wife, darling?”

Grunya disengaged her hand and stood staring for a while at a yellowing apple leaf.

“I’m fond of you, Vasya,” she said after a pause. “But you know what? Let us wait a bit.”

“What for?”

“We’ll get to know each other better in time.”

“Don’t we know each other now?”

“We do, but still we ought to wait.”

“How long?” Vasili said, amused.

Grunya blushed and slapped his hand lightly. “Weil, at least... till the winter....”

He saw her home, and Grunya lingered by the gate until Vasili had turned the corner; then she started for the island where the girls could be heard singing a drawn-out song. Grunya recognized the voices of Irina and Asya, and she longed for their company.

Evening was drawing in. Calves wandered down the dried bed of a little weed-grown stream. Ducks fussed about in the shallow puddles, which were thickly covered

with green duckweed. Through the grove of young willow-trees gleamed the lights of a steamboat lying at the jetty. In the yards women bustled around hot whitewashed stoves. Whiffs of bitterish smoke hovered in the air. And from the island, through the incessant murmur of the tall poplars, floated the soft song of the girls.

.It was all familiar to Grunya since childhood—those twinkling lights on the river, the quacking of the ducks under the brown clayey bank, and the smell of smoke in the stanitsa streets. But to-day, as she looked at the river merging with the blue shadows of evening, she seemed to see it all for the first time, and realized with a little shock of surprise that the change was within herself.

Tired and happy, Grunya slowly approached the forest glade where the girls were sitting, her hands deep in the pockets of her jacket.

"Oh, girls, here's the truant!" Irina shrieked.

The girls, who were sitting in a close half-circle, stirred.

"Sit down, Grunya!" they broke into an excited babble.

"Here's the best spot, under the poplar."

The girls drew their flounced skirts together and made room for Grunya who, still with the same tired happy smile, lay down on the crushed fragrant grass, took off her tight shoes, and stretched her legs out with a sense of indolent pleasure.

"Come on, Grunya, tell us about it!" Irina cried impatiently.

"About what?" Grunya laughed.

"What did he say to you?"

"Who?"

Irina threw up her hands. "Just look at her! You'd think she knew nothing about it!"

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Grunya!" another of the girls flung in.

"Tell us what happened, out with it!"

"I bet you spoke about the wedding?"

"How do they know?" Grunya wondered. She laid her head on the lap of the smiling and silent Asya and said softly: "We did...."

"Hurray!" Irina exclaimed rapturously. "When is it to be, Grunya?"

"In the winter," Grunya answered.

"Winter?" Irina said with a gesture of disappointment. "Why wait so long? Autumn's the best time for weddings—the grapes are ripe, new wine is pressed, and there are heaps of apples, and honey, and things."

Grunya did not answer, and the girls, feeling that she did not care to speak about it, fell silent too. Asya gently stroked her hair and murmured: "What's the difference—autumn, winter, or summer—so long as you're happy and understand each other...."

Irina, her cheek snuggled against Grunya's shoulder, said with a sly smile: "You have changed, Grunya. you know. You used to run about the woods and lakes day and night with that silly old gun of yours, and now it's gone rusty and you don't want to look at it any more. What can it mean, Grunya?"

"She's right," thought Grunya, "I *have* changed."

"I shouldn't be surprised if you became a regular stay-at-home," Irina rattled on. "We hardly ever see you out of doors in the evening."

"No, really, what has happened," Grunya wondered, squeezing her friend's hand. "There must be some reason for this change."

Grunya's thoughts, despite herself, kept returning to Vasili.

"Well, why don't you speak, Grunya?" Irina said. "What has come over you? Who has bewitched you?"

A full crimson moon sailed out between the dark

trunks of the trees. A faint chill drew from the river, and the dewy grass gave off a pungent odour.

"No, girls, I haven't changed at all," Grunya said softly. "Only something has come into my life, something I have been looking forward to but could not quite understand."

She paused, then added in a still lower tone: "He showed me that something, and I followed him...."

Asya embraced her in the darkness and her hair tickled Grunya's cheek.

"He's a nice boy," she said, "the real kind."

The girls got up, shook out their skirts, and with their arms round one another's waists, walked down the forest path which lay checkered in shade and moonlight.

"Let's have our favourite song, Irina," said Asya.

Little Irina stepped forward, and bird-like, with head slightly thrown back and eyes shut, began to sing:

Oh, the mist that curls and rises in the evening....

The girls joined in with a pressure of hands:

Oh, the mist that curls and rises in the evening,

Oh, the mist that flits and flutters in the morning,

Oh, the swan that through the dark night flies.

Every night it flies, every dawn it cries.

Somewhere down the street a group of boys began singing. Their strong voices blended harmoniously with the soft girlish voices, soaring to the starry sky, and the Cossack song, re-echoed by the silent woods, floated heart-achingly sweet over the river, over the golden moonlit lakes and the hushed nocturnal steppe.

Old Shchetinin opened his window, put his head out, and listened as if spell-bound.

Grandpa Shrimp, sitting on the step outside, nodded his grey head proudly and said: "The stanitsa is singing...."

The surveying parties working in the steppe on the left bank of the river and in the flood valley, pitched their tents outside the stanitsa to be nearer to their work. However the number of workers in the different parties grew day by day, and some of them were obliged to move over to Golubovskaya where they rented lodgings with the fishermen and collective farmers.

In the evenings, when the tired geologists and hydraulic engineers returned to the stanitsa, the villagers gathered round them and plied them with questions about the construction projects which had been started in the upper reaches of the river. What worried them most were the vague rumours about the future waterworks so completely changing the regime of the river that all those living along its banks would be compelled to take up new occupations.

There were various rumours. Some people had heard that the level of the water would rise as much as thirty feet, and that all the riverside stanitsas and hamlets would be flooded and their inhabitants moved out to the Donets heights. Others, on the contrary, said that the canal between the two rivers would make them shallower. Some said the fish would now disappear altogether and the vineyards, which had been growing on the flood lands for ages, would be ruined. Others rejoiced in the fact that the river would become one of the country's chief water-ways.

Vasili Zubov knew more about the construction work than others, since Professor Shchetinin, in connection with the forthcoming regulation of the flow, was working out a new system of fish husbandry and was in constant consultation with the construction engineers. In the evenings, sitting on the porch steps of the fishery office, Shchetinin told the fishermen about the gigantic reser-

voir that was going to be built above the dam, the system of hydraulic works, the navigable locks, and the irrigation canals.

"The river will live a new life," the professor said meditatively, puffing at his old cigarette-holder. "The river side landscape will change and even the up-country steppes will become unrecognizable."

He spread on his knees a map covered with coloured pencil marks.

"In ten years or so our region will change beyond recognition," he went on after a pause. "Water from the new man-made sea will flow along canals to the most arid districts. Look at this map. All you can see now are patches of salt marshes with black wormwood. Nothing but mosses and lichens in this arid steppe. W-water will bring life here. Powerful tractors will turn up the virgin soil. Green orchards will blossom on the dead s-salt marshes, wheat will grow. P-ponds, thousands of ponds, will sparkle over the whole steppe. It will change the climate as well as the landscape. The climate will become milder, more humid...."

The fishermen sat listening to him, smoking *makhorka* cigarettes, and, warming to his subject and knitting his grey brows, he went on speaking with fervour.

"This is not a fairy-tale. We'll see all this within the next few years. And we fishermen must seriously prepare ourselves for these important changes on the river. That's not as s-simple as it sounds. In the first place, the new dam that is being erected on the middle reaches will close the way for the b-beluga, the bream, and other fishes to their spawning-grounds. That means we've got to intervene in their fate and provide for their propagation. S-secondly, the checking of the spring spate will sharply affect the water regime of the river and diminish the flow of fresh water into the bay. This will increase the s-salinity of the Azov Sea and, naturally, affect the

conditions of development of the semi-anadromous fishes. Thirdly, we'll be rid of the floods, which means that our flood meadows will run dry, and the flood meadows, as you know, are p-permanent spawning-homes for many important species of food-fish. What's more, the water regularly washed out into the sea a mass of organic substances which are essential for fish-food. That will be done with. Therefore, the task facing us to-day is to remodel the whole f-fish husbandry in keeping with the new conditions on the river."

"A tough job!" the fishermen said, shaking their heads.

"It's no joke, changing the habits of the fish all along the river!"

Antropov, listening to the fishermen's fragmentary remarks, said quietly: "How about the farmers—don't they breed fowls, or raise, say, new varieties of wheat?"

"That's different, Arkhip Ivanovich," old Shrimp said gloomily. "The farmer takes the chicken out of the incubator himself, he holds it in his hands and sees exactly what he's got. It's the same with wheat—you can touch it, judge its quality, and keep an eye on it. But the fish? It lives under the water, you can't check it like you can a chicken. It won't come to your hand, it isn't a calf, you know."

"We haven't tried our hand at real fish husbandry, that's why it worries us," Antropov persisted. "If our fisher tackles the job seriously with scientists to guide him like Lysenko guides the farmers, he's got nothing to worry about, he'll manage it."

"Quite right," Shchetinin nodded. "We shall go into the question of fish-passage arrangements on the dams in the near future, set up a fleet of hydroplanes of our own, and transplant our b-breed-stock by air. We'll build a f-fish-culture station near the dam, and another one

near the delta. We'll install thousands of apparatuses and start incubating b-billions of eggs. We'll build dozens of nurse-ponds and organize our own f-fish farms. It all depends on us, and the Government will give us everything we need."

The gnats whined lazily in the darkness. The men sitting round the porch listened to Shchetinin and tried to picture to themselves what the river was going to look like.

The fishermen had now begun to realize that the old was passing away, and new paths had to be sought. The new system was compellingly catching the eye in the shape of caravans of timber-laden barges, the tarpaulin tents of the surveying parties, the wooden bunk-houses that had sprung up along the middle reaches of the river, the building of the fish hatchery in Golubovskaya—all that restless activity that had invaded the stanitsa after the war. But there were a few men in the stanitsa like Yegor Talalayev, who looked on the river merely as a source of easy gain and refused to bother their heads.

Yegor was exhilarated by the success of his recent poaching. Anisya had taken the catch to the town in small lots and sold it on the market. Out of the proceeds Yegor had bought himself a leather coat and boots, and his pal Trifon had bought an accordion and ordered himself a fashionable fawn suit at a tailoring establishment in town. Yegor had given Anisya five hundred rubles for her trouble and she had bought a length of silk for a frock and a pair of fine silk stockings which she wore on Sundays.

Yegor Talalayev decided to try his luck again and asked the lock master to give him the oxen ostensibly for the purpose of carting in the remaining hay from the flood meadow. Trifon made the same request on the co-op store manager, who allowed him to take a pair of oxen and the waggon. The boys arranged to fish on Saturday

night when the young people were at the cinema and the old folks went to bed earlier.

Yegor tried to get Pimen Talalayev to join in the enterprise, but the latter, greatly to his nephew's surprise, not only flatly refused, but told him off. "You'll come to a bad end one of these days, my boy."

"Go on! Nothing'll happen to me," Yegor said airily.

"You'd better look out."

"Why?"

"Nothing!" snapped Pimen. "D'you know who's going to be Zubov's assistant in place of Prokhorov?"

"Who?"

"You won't catch him gaping like that old jelly-fish. He knocks about the river day and night, he lives in the woods."

"But who is it?"

"Your namesake, Yegor Ivanovich, the trapper."

"Is that so?"

Pimen shrugged his shoulders. "There's a rumour about that Zubov has offered him the job and Yegor has consented. 'I'll wipe all those darned poachers out like vermin,' he says."

He glanced at his subdued nephew and continued sternly: "No flies on that one. Don't forget he knows every bush about the place, every spit of land on the river. There won't be any hiding from him, let me tell you."

Pimen paused and eyed his nephew thoughtfully.

"Time you came to your senses, my boy," he added. "You've got quite out of hand. It's asking for trouble, you are. And that ginger pal of yours is the same. Nothing but girls and vodka on his mind."

"Oh, all right, Uncle Pimen," Yegor said drily. "I'm old enough to take care of myself."

After his talk with Pimen, Yegor had vague misgivings about his plan of night poaching at Luchkovaya,

but he was so sure of himself that he dismissed these disturbing thoughts from his mind.

There was one thing Yegor did not know. On Friday his cousin Anisya, while entertaining the forester Anton Belyavsky in her house, gave their secret away. Anisya was drunk, and she told her merry guest how Yegor and his pals had shot the net at the river bend and how she had been selling the fish on the market all the week. Anton, attaching little importance to the affair, boasted to his sister, Tosya Belyavskaya, how Anisya had treated him to port-wine and saw no reason for concealing from Tosya where the Talalayevs had got the money from. The same evening, which was Saturday, Tosya told Zubov about it, adding that the poachers were planning to do some more fishing at the river bend that night.

"All right," Zubov said. "This time they won't get away."

"You'd better be carefull," Tosya warned him. "My brother says they're taking crow-bars with them."

"What of it?"

"I'm afraid they may be up to no good," the girl said anxiously. "At least, take somebody with you. You know what a mad-brain Yegor is."

Vasili regarded the girl closely. "That's all right, Tosya. But don't tell anyone about it, otherwise it will be all over the stanitsa."

"I won't say a word to anybody," Tosya promised.

When she had gone, Vasili paced up and down his room. Moths circled round the hot glass of the smoking lamp. Vitya was hammering in the next room. The brindled cat sat on the window-sill, purring and stretching sweetly.

Vasili opened the door into Vitya's room. "Vitya, run down to the motor-man and Yegor Ivanovich and tell them to come here at once. Tell them it's urgent."

"What's up? Going out to nab poachers?"

"Poachers? No!" Zubov said with feigned indifference. "The boat's engine is giving trouble, we've got to take it apart and check the pistons."

While Vitya ran off on his errand, Vasili sat at the table with his head propped up in his hands.

"The dirty swine!" he muttered angrily. "Never mind, I'll teach you poaching. You'll get it hot!"

Meanwhile, Yegor and Trifon, unaware of the trap that was being set for them, were sitting in Anisya's house at Atamansky hamlet, waiting for nightfall. Yegor drank vodka in silence, staring at the ruminating oxen outside and listening to Trifon, who was playing on the accordion and singing the drawn-out song about a dying ship's stoker.

Anisya told Yegor nothing about her conversation with Anton Belyavsky, as she had attached no importance to it.

3

Tosya Belyavskaya did not keep her word to Zubov. Anton had told her that Yegor and Trifon often got drunk at Atamansky, and knowing Zubov's hasty temper, she was afraid the drunken boys would offer fierce resistance. The thought of possible foul play worried her so much that she ran off to see Grunya and told her all about it.

"I'm so afraid for Vasili Kirillovich, Grunya," she said breathlessly. "Yegor boasted long ago that he would get even with him. Something's got to be done, Grunya. I'm afraid to think what may happen out there...."

"Have they gone already?" Grunya asked, paling.

"I think so, but they've gone the other way, down to the lock, I believe."

"What can we do?" Grunya said, deeply agitated.

"Let's go to Antropov."

"He's not at home, he and Mosolov are out with the net team."

"Then let's take the *droshky* and drive down to the net team."

Grunya hastily threw a shawl over her shoulders and ran out after Tosya, and both hurried off to the fishery office through the back-gardens. They roused the supply manager, who sat dozing on a bench, got him to give them the horse, harnessed it to the *droshky*, and dashed off to the lake where Grandpa Shrimp's net team was working.

The girls' fears were well founded. The boys at Anisya's house got roaring drunk by midnight and began boasting of how strong and brave they were.

Semyon, listening to the drunken boasts of his brother and Yegor, merely grinned. His vacuous face, covered with the down of callow youth, was fixed in an expression of indolent bliss. He had not uttered a word all the evening and threw coy glances at Anisya, who sat sipping murky young wine mixed with vodka.

"Who's got your tongue, Semyon?" Anisya said, winking to Yegor. "Is drinking vodka all you can do?"

Semyon's plump cheeks reddened and he drew away from the tropical vicinity of the young woman, stammering in confusion: "What is the good of talk? I just do what I'm told."

It was midnight when Yegor, going outside for a minute, came back and said curtly: "Time to get started."

In passing through the dark entry Yegor groped for and found the crow-bar, which was used in winter to break the ice on the porch steps.

"D'you know Inspector Zubov?" he whispered to Semyon, who was walking slightly ahead.

"The chap that runs about in the motor boat?"

"That's the one."

"I know him."

"He's our enemy number one, the dirty blighter," Yegor whispered, breathing spirituous fumes into Semyon's face. "Keep your eyes skinned. In case of anything, detain him, and if he starts getting rough, giye his jacket a little dusting."

Semyon took the crow-bar without a word and followed the others to the river bend. Trifon took his boots and socks off in the dark, tucked up his trousers, and climbed into the boat.

"Semyon had better stay ashore," Yegor whispered to him, "in case anyone turns up."

"All right."

Trifon and Yegor pushed off and began paying out the net. Semyon stood on the bank, listening to the soft splashing of the water, then moved away and sat down under a willow, still gripping the crow-bar, which had grown warm in his hands.

At that moment Vasili Zubov, skirting Atamansky hamlet by way of the back-gardens, was following a cattle trail running down to the river bend. At Talovaya Yegor Ivanovich got into the boat, and Vasili told Yasha to row downstream without switching on the engine, while he himself, shrewdly guessing that the poachers would make a dash for the left bank in case of danger, went there on foot to meet their boat.

After wandering through the weed-ridden melon plots, Vasili came out on to a sandy spit, stopped, and caught the sound of oars. The poachers' boat, now free of the net, was making for the bank. Within ten paces of Vasili stood two teams of oxen, and next to them their driver, a small boy in a shirt which showed white in the gloom.

Semyon, who was dozing under the tree, had not seen Zubov yet, although he kept rubbing his eyes to keep himself awake and stared out into the darkness. Zubov did not notice Semyon either, as the approaching boat claimed all his attention.

The boat had scarcely touched the bank when a searchlight flashed on and the motor-boat engine began to throb quite close at hand. The bluish beam of the searchlight swept over the river and came to rest on the men huddled together in the bow. For a brief moment the searchlight snatched out of the darkness a second boat which was rowing hard towards the bank from midstream.

Had Yegor Talalayev taken notice of this second boat he would have seen in it Antropov, Mosolov, Grunya, Tosya Belyavskaya, and two young fishermen of the net team. But neither Yegor nor Trifon saw this boat. They were staring at the motor boat which was racing down on them from the left.

"Stop!" Yegor Ivanovich shouted from the motor boat.

The poachers leaped ashore and made for the woods, but Zubov barred their way.

"Stop, stay where you are!" he shouted, running towards Trifon, who was in the lead.

Just then Semyon, with whom Zubov had drawn level, jumped out from behind the trees and stood rooted to the spot with gaping mouth, holding the crow-bar. Vasili, quick as thought, knocked the crow-bar out of his hands and seized him by the belt.

"Wait a minute, don't be in a hurry," Vasili said.

"Drive the oxen into the woods, quick!" yelled Yegor.

The boys dashed to the right, but suddenly the thick-set figure of Antropov, lit up by the searchlight, rose in front of them. He stood on the narrow path with his legs planted wide apart, gripping his belt with clenched fists, and behind him, Yegor saw the figures of the fishermen.

"How d'you do, Talalayev!" Antropov said through clenched teeth. "No use running away now you've met me, you know who you're dealing with, don't you?"

The boys scowled now at Antropov, now at Vasili, next to whom stood the frightened Semyon who had picked the crow-bar up from the ground.

Still gripping his belt with both fists, Antropov turned to the boys and threw out curtly: "Well, get into the boat."

One of the fishermen took the reins out of the hands of the trembling young driver and drove the oxen along the bank. The poachers, surrounded by the fishermen, got into the boat with hanging heads.

"Hand them over to the village Soviet," Antropov said, "and tell some men to come down from the second team to drag the net ashore."

The invisible seine swayed in the dark river, and the agitated water splashed against the night-chilled sand of the bank.

4

When the trees shed their leaves and the gardeners began to dig the vines into the ground, flocks of wild geese flew over the stanitsa. They had a long and hard journey before them, and so they flew at a leisurely pace, in unbroken formation—bird after bird, flock after flock. Morning and day the cold blue of the bright sky was dotted with flocks of wild geese flying south, and the air was filled with their honking roll-calls. Sometimes a gusty head wind would blow the young geese flying in the rear off their path, and they would break the ordered ranks of flight and circle bewilderedly over the steppe until the old leader, slackening the measured rhythm of the flight, hailed them with a harsh guttural cry. They would then fall into their places again, and the flock would fly on, melting into the blue haze.

Yet one would sometimes come across an enfeebled old straggler on a lake or in the shoals of some steppe creek. Unable to keep up with the flock, the bird flew all alone, frequently alighting to recover its breath and strength.

The swampy banks of the creek were studded with the stone-dry tracks of ox and horse hoofs. The broken stems of brownish reeds swayed gently in the wind. The wind-ruffled surface of the limpid water reflected the cold sun, and all around hung the bitterish odour of dying worm-wood.

Nimble pochards swam down the long creek, thin-legged sand-pipers wandered over the quaggy ground near the river bend, and among them the lonely goose looked like a giant. She sat for a long time rocking on the water, craning her neck and staring up into the blue void of the sky. Suddenly, hearing the distant calls of an unseen goose flock, she took a running start, heavily flapping her dripping wings, and rose into the air. The earth, monotonously brown with the dull tints of autumn, swept back beneath her together with the skimming shadows of straw-ricks, the dark square patches of tilth, and the grey ribbons of country lanes.

The goose held on a steady course south, and strange flocks kept overtaking her. She greeted them with a short cry, peering vainly into the hazy depths of the sky and doggedly continuing her arduous flight.

"She'll get there all right," Yegor Ivanovich said to Shchetinin, following the bird with his eyes. "If she doesn't find her own flock, she'll join another."

With the approach of autumn, Yegor Ivanovich ever more often accompanied Professor Shchetinin on his rambles, and would sit with him on the bank telling the story of his life.

Information concerning some of the marked belugas had reached Golubovskaya during the last few weeks, but there was little comfort in these tidings.

The buoy-keeper Anisim had found one dead beluga above the dam. It had been washed ashore among the rushes and when Anisim had touched the huge fish with his oar he noticed that its belly was gashed as

by some sharp instrument. The buoy-keeper took the tag off and brought it to Shchetinin.

"Here you are, Comrade Professor," he had said. "I took this off your fish. It's lying dead at the mouth of the Donets."

Shchetinin took the tag in silence, toyed with it, had a chat with the buoy-keeper, then took out his notebook and made the following entry: "Beluga No. 54. Female. Dead."

Two days later Anton Belyavsky, the forester, while making his round of the poplar stands on Bream Island, saw the head of a beluga on the sandy bank. He squatted down and carefully examined the sand, then removed the tag, muttering: "Must have been washed ashore, and the forest beasts tore it to pieces."

And another laconic entry was made in Shchetinin's diary: "Head of marked female beluga No. 84 discovered in the sand on Bream Island."

Three days after this a telegram was delivered to the professor from the district inspection officer: "Fishermen found dead beluga No. 61 near Bagayevskaya stop Mailing report and tag."

The old Golubovskaya fishermen were aware that Shchetinin was deeply concerned about the fate of the transplanted belugas. Seeing the professor sitting on the bank, they went up to him, greeted him, and inquired discreetly: "How's it going with our belugas, Professor?"

Shchetinin's face clouded.

"We'll have to wait..." he said, staring at the river.

"What's the sense?" Grandpa Shrimp said with a shrug. "This beluga business is a bad job by the looks of it."

"You've got to have more patience," the professor muttered irritably, his lips twitching. "Too early to count our chickens yet. We'll w-wait. F-five or six dead belugas don't decide the issue."

When the fishermen went away and the professor was left alone with Yegor Ivanovich, his face clouded and he voiced his thoughts aloud.

"The river isn't a laboratory table, where you can see the immediate results of an experiment. Still, the idea of transplanting beluga-breeders across the dam is undoubtedly correct. Only sceptics can deny it."

Rumours reached Shchetinin that some of his colleagues were attempting to discredit the expedition's work, but he paid no attention to this. He only grew more morose and irritable every day.

It was in such a mood that Mosolov found him one day on the bank. He went up to the professor, greeted him, sat down on an overturned boat, and told him the latest stanitsa news.

"Our poachers were tried in town yesterday," he said.

"What poachers?" Shchetinin growled, displeased that the chairman had broken in on his reflections.

"Yegor Talalayev and the salesman Trifon. The inspector caught them at Luchkovaya."

"Well?"

"They both got what was coming to them. Yegor, as the ringleader, got a term, and Trifon compulsory labour."

"Serves them right," Shchetinin said.

Noticing the professor's ill humour, Mosolov tactfully inquired: "Still worrying about your belugas, Ilya Afanasievich?"

"Your belugas, not mine," Shchetinin took him up gruffly. "And I advise *you* to worry about them, too."

"I don't understand much about this business," Mosolov said, somewhat disconcerted.

"Make it your business."

"I ought to, of course. But it isn't easy for me."

Shchetinin raised his glasses to his forehead with a weary gesture.

"Do you think it's easy for me?" he said suddenly. He clasped his knees and became sunk in thought. "It's still harder for me, my friend."

"Why?"

"Because I'd like to see results quickly, and that's impossible for the time being. B-because foolish and tedious sceptics doubt the expediency of what we are doing and prefer to stand aloof. And lastly, b-because the beluga has got to be saved from destruction, and I don't quite see yet how to do it."

"When can we expect to see the results of the transplantation?" Mosolov asked.

"Not before spring. Perhaps even later. Just now the transplanted belugas are somewhere at large above the dam. The dead specimens don't count, I'm interested in the live ones—how they behave, whether they have reached the spawning-grounds and deposited their eggs or not. That's what we've got to know."

"Can we?"

"Yes," Shchetinin said with conviction.

"But how?"

"The b-belugas which we transplanted across the dam belong to the so-called 'winter' race. They go to the spawning-grounds not in spring, but in summer and autumn. After ascending the river the beluga hibernates in holes and doesn't deposit her eggs until spring. S-so we'll have to wait till spring."

"And then what?"

"Then we shall see. After spawning the females drop back into the sea. If the fishermen catch any labelled belugas and those belugas prove to have spawned, our experiment will have been a success."

"Yes," Mosolov sighed, "a tricky job."

He looked at the professor's stooped figure with unconcealed admiration.

"Tell me this, Ilya Afanasievich," he said, "if this

means so much to us, how is it that no one else besides yourself is handling this job?"

"Who said they're not?" Shchetinin's eyebrows went up. "Quite a number of people are dealing with the beluga problem. Members of our staff are working on it now at the fish-culture station downstream. In Moscow many scientists are studying the belugas in various research institutes."

"Are there any results?" Mosolov asked with interest.

"There are, or rather there is a promise of results," Shchetinin said meditatively. "A Moscow post-graduate is working successfully on the artificial breeding and rearing of beluga young. The problem of beluga fodder is also being studied. Scientists are thinking of applying yarovization to belugas of the winter race according to the method of Academician Lysenko, whose researches in wheat and potatoes provide excellent pointers for research in other fields." Shchetinin turned to Mosolov and his gloomy face lit up with a smile.

"So you see, I'm not working alone, Comrade Mosolov. If only for that reason, we can't fail. We're working collectively, and that makes for strength. Besides, the state is giving us funds enough to ensure the success of all and every undertaking that benefits the people."

"Yes," Mosolov said, rising, "I understand that." He pressed Shchetinin's hand and added genially: "Very well then, we'll wait and see."

On his way back to the stanitsa, Mosolov recalled his conversation with the professor and thought: "He is right. The sceptics, if there are any, don't count for anything. Their fooleries can't stop us."

He seemed to have forgotten that only recently many things had not been as clear to him as they were now. Although Mosolov himself was unaware of it, a great change had come over him. His talks with Nazarov and Antropov, his association with Shchetinin, and even his

tiffs with Zubov had caused him to revise his views on many things. He realized that the old methods of work by rule of thumb would not get him anywhere, and that, as chairman of the kolkhoz, he was bound to take the lead in the forward march of things which were already actually changing the obsolescent scheme of fish husbandry and gradually transforming it into a complex, highly mechanized industry.

"Yes," he reflected, "there's no getting away from it, a man has got to keep on learning. Knowing how to shoot a net and land a catch is not enough nowadays."

But the consolatory thought still lingered in his mind: "Learning's a good thing, but fishing's more important for the kolkhoz than transplantation, fry preservation, and other such new-fangled notions. They're important, too, there's no saying, but the catch is the main thing when all is said and done."

Try as he might, Mosolov could not grasp the connection between what Shchetinin was doing and the kolkhoz's catch plan, and he remained convinced that "the catch was what counted."

Outside the kolkhoz office he met Zubov. The latter was running with a box of nails in his hands, and his face wore a look of joyous preoccupation.

"Hullo, Kirillovich!" Mosolov hailed him. "Wait a minute. Where are you going with those nails?"

"I've started to put up my house," Vasili said. "The village Soviet allotted a plot for the fishery inspection yesterday, and we've started work."

"Where's the site?" Mosolov asked.

"They've given me the place I asked for—on the island near Zamanukha, so's I can see the fishing-places through the windows."

"You're a sly fox," Mosolov smiled. "But there's no need for it now."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, your chief poacher, Yegor Talalayev, has passed out of the picture—he's been arrested, and Trifon's been sent somewhere. Who's going to catch fish now? Surely not Grandpa Shrimp?"

Vasili looked at Mosolov and laughed. "Why necessarily Grandpa Shrimp? I've been told that Kuzma Mosolov, the chairman of the fishing kolkhoz, had two teams doing fairly successful fishing in the prohibited zone last year by arrangement with the inspector."

Mosolov waved his hand in a gesture of embarrassment. "What of it? It did happen, I don't deny it. But that's quite a different thing. Mosolov didn't take as much as an anchovy for himself, and he never will. He fished in your zone for the state and delivered all the fish to the state——"

"I know," Zubov interrupted him, "but that won't happen again, Kuzma Fedorovich, because it isn't in the state's interests."

"Oh, all right, all right!" Mosolov said. He touched Vasili on the shoulder and added conciliatingly: "Look here, let bygones be bygones. That kind of fishing won't happen again, because the chairman of the kolkhoz as well as the fishermen are beginning to understand a thing or two. I've just been talking with our professor about belugas—he told me so many interesting things I could have listened to him all day."

Seeing that Vasili was glancing at his watch for the third time, Mosolov smiled apologetically: "All right, Kirillovich, run along. But don't forget to invite the chairman to the house-warming."

"Why, of course," Vasili said.

He took his leave of Mosolov and carried the box of nails down to the plot where the little house shipped down by the Fisheries Trust was already being assembled. The site was on the southern side of the island in the woods close to the water's edge. The old poplars and dense wil-

low thickets afforded excellent protection against the cold north wind, and what was most important, the spot commanded an open view of all the prohibited zones on which the inspector had to keep an eye.

At Zubov's request, the house was being put up by the stanitsa's best carpenter, Nikita Ivanovich, a taciturn old man known throughout the countryside. Before the war Nikita Ivanovich had worked in the fishery's carpenter team, but nursing a grievance against the chairman, he had gone over to the collective farm of which Bugrov was in charge.

"If people don't know an artistic piece of work when they see it, there's nothing for me to do here," the old man had said stubbornly. "The fishery chairman sees no difference between a book cabinet and a hog's trough."

Of medium height, with a slight stoop, stern and sombre features, a short bristly moustache, searching grey eyes under heavy lids, and the slow leisurely gait of a man fully conscious of his own worth, Nikita Ivanovich was an arresting figure.

When Zubov applied to the fishery office for a carpenter who knew how to handle a prefabricated house, Antropov glanced at Mosolov, saying: "We'll have to ask Nikita Ivanovich."

"What about our own carpenters?" Mosolov said.

"They're no good!" Antropov said with a deprecatory gesture. "I've seen the blue-prints of the house. It has three rooms, a kitchen, a veranda, pantries and things, sinks, and a bath-room. Over a hundred yards of piping alone, not to mention a dozen cases with all kinds of clamps, brackets, bolts, screws, laths, and hooks. I don't know anybody except Nikita Ivanovich who'll make head or tail of it all."

"Is he a good craftsman?" Zubov asked.

"Good?" Antropov said, livening up. "Why, the man's an artist, Vasili Kirillovich. He used to build houses in

all the stanitsas in the old days, and you should see what houses! They look like pictures at an exhibition—cornices, porches, door-cases, window-frames, shutters—all in different patterns like the finest lacework. And mind you, he did it all by hand, with his simple tools.”

“The other day he showed me a turner’s lathe he had made for the farm’s workshop,” Mosolov said.

“Made it himself?”

“Yes. He found an old reaper-wheel, half a dozen oak logs and a couple of belts. But you ought to see the job he made of it! It isn’t a lathe, it’s a daisy. Just touch the pedal and it’ll turn anything you want.”

“What did he have against the fishery?” Zubov asked.

“He was sore at the chairman,” Mosolov grinned.

“You?”

“No, there was a different chairman here before the war. Nikita Ivanovich made a table for the kolkhoz club. Took him nearly a year to do it. People say it was a beauty. And that chairman went and gave it away to somebody. Carted it up to someone in the district or regional centre, not sure which. Now, Nikita’s a touchy old boy. ‘What?’ he says. ‘I make a table for the fishing folks and you go and give it away like it was your own property? You’re not a chairman,’ he says, ‘you’re a——’ I don’t know exactly what he called him, but anyway, they had a row, and the old man went over to the collective farm.”

When Vasili asked Nikita Ivanovich to put the house up on the island for him, the old carpenter surveyed him closely and said abruptly: “All right, I will.”

As soon as work got under way at the site, Vasili went out there every morning and stood lost in admiration of Nikita Ivanovich. The old man was a wizard with his hands. Everything his rough, toil-worn fingers touched seemed to spring to life. The finest of wood shavings, smelling of fresh pine, flew out from under his plane with

a swish; his sharp axe trimmed a post with such smooth precision that one could measure its facets to the fraction of an inch, and a nail, however rusty and thin, sank into the wood after two or three blows of the hammer.

Nikita Ivanovich seldom spoke. With slightly stooping shoulders and legs planted wide apart, he stood at an improvised bench knocked together out of boards and worked with grim, silent concentration.

Occasionally he would throw out to his young mate: "Nails!" "Plane!" "Screwdriver!" "Mallet!"

Zubov noticed that the old craftsman could not stand faulty work and that he would do a job over and over again until it was flawless. The hinge on the door would seem to be a perfect fit, yet he would check it with a set square, make a wry face, and start unscrewing it to refit it in his own way. The sight of a plank with a knot knocked out of it, a nail driven in at ever so slight an angle, a saw with a notch in it, or any unevenness of surface on a beech lath was enough to reduce him to a state of speechless fury. Scowling and clenching his teeth, he would set to work retrimming and replaning the job with sullen doggedness and in utter silence.

But when one piece or other fitted nicely into its place, or a plank took on a mirror-smooth surface under his jack-plane, Nikita Ivanovich would beam. He never spoke a word on these occasions either, just screwed up his left eye in appreciative scrutiny of some happy performance, drew a breath of relief, and gently stroked the appeased immobile wood, which was still warm with the effort of toil.

Vasili watched the old man for hours, and seeing how quickly the walls of his bright, cozy little house were running up, he would exclaim admiringly: "What wonderful hands!"

"That is how a real man should work," Vasili thought. He should put his whole heart and soul into what he is

doing, then he will enjoy even the hardest task. He always sees a job through to the end, and does it in such a way that he gets full satisfaction out of it and never needs reproach himself.

Thinking of Nikita Ivanovich and admiring his work, Zubov asked himself: "Can I work that way?" and was forced to admit with a sense of shame that he could not, that he still lacked grit, experience, and perseverance.

"No, I have a long way to go yet," Vasili thought. "I'm too hasty, hot-headed, too easy-going. That won't do. One must learn to master little things as well as big ones. . . ."

One day Pimen Talalayev drifted on to the site where the inspector's house was being built. Shunning people's society, he had shut himself up in the ferryman's hut, but feeling bored and miserable, he had decided to take a stroll over the island. Seeing that Nikita Ivanovich was working alone, he went over to him and silently sat down on a stack of boards.

"Building, eh?" he threw out apathetically.

The old carpenter glanced at him gloomily from under the peak of his faded cap and said nothing.

"Heigh-ho!" Pimen sighed. "I don't know what to do with myself, feel sort of run down . . . almost lost the use of my legs, in a manner of speaking."

"Lost the use of your head, you mean," Nikita Ivanovich growled.

Pimen stared at him in surprise. "What's that?"

"Nothing!"

Nikita Ivanovich and Pimen Talalayev were next-door neighbours and knew each other well, although in recent years they met rarely, since the old carpenter worked in the farm workshop, while Pimen spent day and night on the river.

"Come on, what d'you mean?" Pimen insisted.

The jack-plane flew in the sinewy hands of the carpenter and silky spirals of pine shavings dropped thick and fast on the ground.

"What's the use of talking," Nikita Ivanovich shook him off with annoyance. "There's only one word that fits you, and that's fool."

Pimen did not answer. Out there in Avdei's gloom-ridden hut, awakening on the musty smelly bunk, he had groaned and sighed, spat out the bitter taste of *makhorka* fag-ends on to the earthen floor, and cursed himself more than once for he knew not what. He still considered himself in the right, and hated Zubov, Antropov, Mosolov, Grunya, Stepan Khudyakov, and the fishermen of his team, none of whom, in his opinion, were fit to hold a candle to him, but who still continued working while he, an experienced fisherman, lay about in the hut like a useless log.

Night after night, after tossing about on the bunk, he had gone out to the bank where he stood listening to the measured creaking of the rowlocks on the fishermen's boats and drinking in the smell of fresh fish, then lowering his strong head, which was beginning to grow bald, he cursed wearisomely and wandered about till daybreak over the moist springy sand, thinking hard and furiously of this incomprehensible thing that had happened to him.

"You tell me—what do you mean?" he repeated with sullen resentment. "What did you call me a fool for?"

Laying aside a smoothly planed board, Nikita Ivanovich stroked it, then swiftly sawed off the ends, fitted it to the window-sill, and laid an old carpenter's level on the sill. The air bubble came to rest exactly between the two notches in the glass tube.

Nikita Ivanovich glowered at Pimen. "Here... see that instrument? It's called a level. A carpenter checks the levelness of things with it. If a piece of wood, say,

isn't straight, the carpenter trims, planes, or hammers it down so's it shouldn't be lop-sided and spoil the beauty of a building."

"What are you telling me baby-stories for?" Pimen said with a sneer. "I've handed a level hundreds of times myself."

The old man seated himself on the stack of boards, and regarded Pimen with a stern, sombre eye.

"Now that's exactly what's happened to you, Pimen," he went on. "Folks have put an invisible level to your person, and you've shown them your lop-sidedness right away—which way you've skewed and how many gnarly old knots you've got stuck about all over you. They thought to trim you up a bit, knock you into human shape, but you stand fast like a crazy stump. One would think God nailed you down crooked the day you was born and with whopping big rusty nails at that. Well, what d'you expect them to do? They pried you up with a crow-bar and yanked you out, roots and all, so's you shouldn't uglify the new building. You proved yourself to be an all-round fool, the worse for you. So it's no-use blaming anybody. You've got yourself to thank for being all twisted and lop-sided."

Pimen shrank back with a stunned look and stared wildly at the old man's stern unrelenting face.

"What d'you mean by that?" he stammered.

"What I said," Nikita Ivanovich snapped.

"D'you know that I've been kicked out of my job as team-leader and sent to work with the women in the net team, and now they're driving me out of there, too?"

"Who's driving you out?"

"All of them. We've no use for you, they say, because you're a waster and a shirker. I'm weak on my legs and I can't work. I've got a pain inside, but they don't give a pin."

"You're a humbug, Pimen," the carpenter retorted

angrily. "Trying to fool yourself and others, that's what you're doing. You're not ill at all, you're a hundred times healthier than I am. It's just an excuse, because hatred of people rankles in you and fuddles your brain. I dare say you imagine all men are crooked and you're the only straight one? Well, take it from me, it's exactly the other way round. The fishermen have struck out on a new trail, but you're blundering along by crooked ways and don't want to get yourself straight."

Pimen wilted and sat subdued, his hands thrust into the wide tops of his *valenki*. He saw once more in the old man's words that harsh truth which had lately driven him out of doors in the dreary nights and made him pace up and down the bank, peering jealously at the glimmering lights of the inaccessible camp-fires of the fishermen out at Poplar Woods.

"No, Nikita," he said dismally, "there's no turning back for me now. People can't stand the sight of me, I'm hateful to them. He's a bad lot, they say. Stepan Khudyakov won't have me, the women are all demanding I should be kicked out of the net team, and as for Antropov, he just looks daggers at me."

Nikita Ivanovich cupped his hand over his eyes and peered into the willow thickets. "There he comes."

"Who?" Pimen said, getting up.

"Antropov."

Pimen hurried away without a parting word, and took a path leading to the river, but was unable to avoid a meeting with Antropov. The latter, in trousers soaked to the knees and with the tops of his rubber waders turned down almost to the ground, was making his way towards Nikita Ivanovich when he ran into Pimen at the gate of the inspector's little yard.

Antropov stopped, barring Pimen's path. He threw a keen glance at the ex-team-leader's haggard unshaven face and let fall drily: "Hullo, Talalayev."

"Hullo," Pimen answered, lowering his head.

"What's the matter? Still ill?"

Pimen shot him a glance from under shaggy brows.

"Yes . . . feeling kind of queer. . . ."

Antropov stepped up closer. "Look here. The net team's demanding you should be expelled from the kol-khoz altogether. We're going to discuss it to-morrow. None of the teams want to have you."

Talalayev's face turned grey. The thing he had most feared had come at last and there was nothing he could do to avert the disaster.

He looked up with bleak eyes and said bewilderedly: "What am I going to do? I mean—I've spent fifty years of my life on the river."

Antropov laid a heavy hand on his shoulder. "Look here, Talalayev," he said, "you've passed the verdict on yourself. But still—I mean—I'd like to give you another chance." He brought his swarthy face close to Pimen's and said firmly: "If you give me your word . . . I'll take you into my team."

Pimen slowly took Antropov's hand off his shoulder, and said huskily: "Thanks, Arkhip."

Nikita Ivanovich did not hear what they were talking about, but he watched them out of the tail of his eye and saw them walk off together towards the stanitsa.

He got up from the stack of boards, squinting against the sun, and sighed: "There . . . a real good craftsman can square the worst bit of timber to the level."

The little house on the island grew day by day. It was placed on piles six feet high and had a glass-framed veranda built against the frontage.

His work done, Nikita Ivanovich collected the shavings in a basket, kindled the small tiled Dutch stove,

then went out into the yard to admire the wisp of smoke curling over the chimney.

"The house is finished," he sternly announced to Vasili. "You can bring the mistress home."

"What mistress?" Vasili said, taken aback.

"That's your business, not mine," the old man said tersely. "Only home is not a home without a mistress in it."

He packed his tools away neatly in his bag, slung it over his shoulder, and gave Vasili his big rough hand. "Good-bye. Good luck. Let me know when you have the house-warming."

Vasili was left by himself. The shavings in the stove burned down and the ashes turned white.

Vasili, key in hand, walked through the empty rooms, which smelt of resin, and stopped by the window.

Day was ebbing into dusk. Carts loomed darkly on the left bank by the ferry. A crescent moon glinted sharply over the bluish forest. To the left, near the lock-chamber, a twin-deck passenger boat stood at anchor, waiting for its turn. The red lights of buoys twinkling at the river bend were reflected in the placid water.

For a moment Vasili was assailed by a poignant sense of loneliness.

What was it the old man had said: "Home is not a home without a mistress."

Vasili roamed the bank all through the evening. He bent down and peered into the dark mirror of the river, listened to the monotonous murmur of the water, then squatted down on the cold sand and smoked. Feeling chilly after a while, he ran home, and after a hasty supper, told Marfa: "Don't lock the door, I shan't be long."

"Where can you be going so late?" Marfa said with a smile.

"To see Yegor Ivanovich," Vasili answered offhand.

He slipped his coat on and went out, making straight for Grunya's house.

Prokhorov was not at home. Grunya, with the linen laid out on the chairs, was ironing. On a plywood shelf between the windows stood an oil-lamp, which threw a circle of yellow light on the table-cloth. Grunya sprinkled water on the dry linen, then testing the hot iron with a wet finger, she started ironing towels, pillow-cases, sheets, and handkerchiefs.

Bunka, a fat cat with a bruised nose, rubbed itself against the girl's legs, and Grunya, with the iron in her hands, bent down and crooned to it.

There was a tap on the window.

"Who is it?" Grunya asked.

"It's me," she heard Vasili's voice.

Grunya rushed to the door.

Vasili came in and said good evening, then took off his hat and coat and sat down.

"How are you getting on, Grunya?" he said, at a loss how to start the conversation.

"I'm all right," the girl said, laughing. "I'm ironing and singing Bunka a song."

Vasili smiled. "I missed you," he said.

"No, really?"

"My word of honour. We saw each other yesterday, but it seems a year to me."

He got up, took Grunya's hand, turned it palm upwards, and kissed it.

"Let's go out for a walk, darling," he whispered. "We haven't been out together for ages."

"All right, only let's wait till father comes——"

Grunya broke off with a cry and rushed towards the table.

"What's the matter?" he said, startled.

"Can't you see? I left the iron standing and burnt a hole in the pillow-case."

She put the iron on the stove, folded the burnt pillowcase, and with the air of a conspirator, stuffed it away behind the books.

"Father's coming, I heard the wicket bang."

Prokhorov came in. He nodded a polite greeting to Vasili, washed his hands in the kitchen, and said to Grunya: "Well, little housewife, what have you got for dinner this evening?"

"The dinner's in the oven," Grunya answered gaily. "I'll warm it up."

Prokhorov gave Vasili the impression of having filled out lately, acquired a certain poise and dignity he had lacked before. His voice, too, had firmer, more confident notes in it.

"You're not sorry that you've gone over to the curing-shop to work, are you?" Vasili asked.

Prokhorov carefully smoothed his sparse greying hair. "Sorry? No, Vasili Kirillovich," he murmured thoughtfully. "As a matter of fact it's done me a world of good. It's different work entirely. No rows with people, no ill feeling on either side. Just stand by your weighing-machine and write out receipts. All the company you want, and a roof over your head in bad weather. You know what my health is like."

"There, you see," Vasili smiled. "I was wrong in refusing to let you go."

"So it works out."

Grunya warmed up the dinner, slipped on her jacket, and said to her father: "We're going out, Dad, shan't be long."

They went out, but it was quite a long time before Grunya returned.

They wandered all night through the quiet streets of the stanitsa, went down to the river, and sat there on an overturned boat. It was moist and chilly, and at last Grunya confessed: "I'm frozen, Vasya."

Vasili took his coat off, wrapped it round her, then took her on to his knees, held her close, and began kissing her.

It was daybreak when they got up and walked along the bank.

There was a deep stillness all around. A fringe of silvery ice had formed round the shallow riverside puddles. The fallen leaves, damp from the night air and touched with hoar-frost, rustled underfoot. Someone had kindled a camp-fire by the jetty, where the fishing-boats stood, and the strong smell of pitch came up on the wind together with the smoke.

Vasili, in lighting his cigarette, accidentally pulled a key out of his pocket. He laughed, glanced at Grunya's pale face, and said: "Would you like to see my house, darling?"

"Why, is it quite finished?" Grunya said, surprised.

"Yes, it was finished yesterday."

They climbed down the steep bank, crossed to the island, and came out to where the little house stood. The flaming sunrise was reflected in its windows.

Vasili slackened his pace and held the key out to Grunya.

"Enter, dear mistress," he said.

"Aren't we going to wait till winter?" Grunya smiled.

"Winter's come already," Vasili said gravely. "We've just seen the first ice."

Zhigayev, the chairman of the rural Soviet, registered their marriage, gave them the marriage certificate, and congratulated them.

"As a representative of the authorities," he said humorously, "I make one condition—the newly-weds are not to leave the stanitsa and throw the fishermen over, otherwise the marriage will be declared null and void."

"We have no intention of leaving," Vasili assured him.

"Wait a minute, don't make rash promises," Zhigayev said, raising a warning hand.

"Why?"

"I'll explain." The chairman pulled out a drawer of his desk and produced a green form. "A telegram. Came from the district centre yesterday, but hasn't been delivered yet. Read it."

Vasili read it out:

" 'By order of Head Office Fishery Inspector Zubov directed to Moscow as from December first to attend three-months' training course stop Under-Inspector to take temporary charge signed Bardin Chief of Fisheries Trust.' "

"Oh, but—" Grunya began in dismay.

"That's all right, sweetheart, we'll go to Moscow together," Vasili said. "I'll speak to Mosolov, he'll let you off."

Vasili folded the telegram, put it away in his pocket, and threw Zhigayev a gay glance.

"As for the stanitsa, Comrade Zhigayev, you needn't worry—I'll be back at the old job in three months' time."

Vasili and Grunya wanted to move into the new house on the island without any celebrations and live there until their departure for Moscow, but objections were raised by Marfa and Prokhorov.

"What's the idea?" Marfa indignantly rebuked Vasili. "You two have married for a lifetime and you've got to celebrate a proper wedding and house-warming. I've talked it over with Mosolov. Grunya's our best kolkhoz girl, after all. D'you think our fisher folk will let her get married on the quiet? Why, it's an outrage!"

Vasili listened to Marfa's lecture with a shamefaced smile. He felt embarrassed and did not want to have people fussing around him and Grunya, but everyone had congratulated him so cordially that he eventually gave in.

"All right, Marfa Panteleyevna," he said, "have it your way."

For several days Vasili and Grunya lived in a dream. They suddenly became aware that many people, some of them little more than strangers, entertained a deep affection for them. Bugrov sent them a gift of wine and sun-dried grapes, Antropov a keg of mead, Mosolov and his wife a splendid wedding cake, Stepan Khudyakov some deliciously pickled fish, and Yegor Ivanovich brought and handed over to Marfa fifteen wild ducks and forty odd partridges, which she roasted and stuffed with baked apples. Tosya and Irina helped Grunya to sew her dresses. Grandpa Shrimp moved their belongings out to the island home. Elena Makeyeva baked heaps of wheat buns and doughnuts.

Vasili hardly saw Grunya during those busy days. He made the customary round of his area and chatted with people, doing everything he usually did, but never for a moment did the thrilling sensation of something strangely new and joyous desert him.

Finally Marfa announced the day of the wedding party.

Banquet tables were placed in all the rooms, and the little house on the island was crowded to overflowing.

Vasili sat next to Grunya, and the unfamiliar smell of her scent made him feel as if he were sitting beside a stranger.

Professor Shchetinin eyed Vasili with a twinkle of amusement. The old man was slightly in his cups, and he swayed on his chair as he leaned over to Nikita Ivanovich sitting on his right.

"It does you good to look at them," he said. "And shall I tell you w-why? Because they'll be able to complete what I have started."

Nikita Ivanovich put his unfinished glass down and said gruffly: "Don't shove your work off on to others,

Finish the job yourself, once you've started it. No matter how hard it is, do it yourself."

"It's all very well for you," Shchetinin said, waving his hand deprecatingly. "Try working the way I do—without seeing any results, b-because you may have to wait ten years before you see any."

Nikita Ivanovich stared tipsily at the professor.

"Pooh, as though I don't know!" he suddenly said in a tearful voice. "D'you know how many houses I built with these hands? Hundreds. But the thing I most wanted to do I haven't done yet."

"What's that?"

"A new club. A club big enough to house the whole stanitsa. A club with moulded ceilings and wood carvings, with flowers all over the place." His face expanded in a smile. "I can build anything you like! If you want, I can build a whole stanitsa out of tiny wood blocks. Pretty as a toy, painted up in all colours!"

Vasili sat listening to the hubbub of voices, and it seemed to him that he had known all these people for years, that they all loved him and he would be very happy living and working among them, because they, as he, already shared one great common happiness.

Around him were wine-flushed men and women—farmers, vinedressers, fishermen, and trappers—stanitsa dwellers accustomed since childhood to work on the land and on the water. They sang, laughed, danced, and talked about wheat, about bare fallows, about cows, about how to caulk boats, cast nets, and plant vines; they ate, drank wine, and their dark work-hardened hands stood out against the white cloth of the long table.

"Well, Kirillovich," Antropov said, leaning over to Vasili, "here's our floating stanitsa. Look and admire, and remember—you'll never be lost with these people! They know where they're going and they're not afraid of work. You can move mountains with such people, and

take it from me, our stanitsa is staunch to the backbone." He squeezed Vasili's hand and added with a good-natured smile: "We'll see you off to Moscow, and expect you back in the spring to launch the new job."

"As for you, Grunya," Mosolov said with a wink to Antropov, "we've sort of decided to give you a bonus—you'll go to Moscow with your young husband. In any case there isn't much for you to do here in the winter."

All night long the little house on the island rang with songs, music, and gay laughter.

The party broke up towards daybreak.

The next day Professor Shchetinin called on Zubov to say good-bye. The expedition's work was finished and the old man was leaving the stanitsa.

"D'you know, Ilya Afanasievich," Vasili said, "although I'm going to Moscow, my thoughts are here. I'm just dying to know the results of your beluga experiments. I want to start planned fish-breeding in my area. It's not going to be easy work. People have a good deal to learn yet."

Vasili spoke with emotion, and Shchetinin, sitting at the table, listened to him and gazed at the leafless willow-tree outside the window. Although a shadow of fatigue lay on the old man's cheeks and deep lines were drawn about his mouth, Vasili noticed the familiar twinkle of irrepressible humour in his eyes.

"All you say is right," Shchetinin said. "It's not going to be easy, but the fishermen will do it."

"They will, if there are no Talalayevs among them."

"Don't let the Talalayevs worry you," Shchetinin said with a gesture of dismissal. "They'll be splashed out, like the scum off a good fish soup. It's people like Victor Petrovich you've got to look to——"

"Who's Victor Petrovich?"

"That little boy, your old landlady's s-son. He came running down to me the other day to tell me he has or-

ganized a school group for studying the plankton of the river. How do you like that? The little monkey! He's collecting specimens of the crustacea, rotifera, and other aquatic animals, and he told me quite seriously that he had submitted a m-memorandum to the kolkhoz board asking them to buy another m-microscope. Those are the ones you should look to. That will be the f-fisherman of the new generation. He's coming out on to the stage already."

Shchetinin told Zubov that the Council of Ministers would probably soon endorse a project for the construction of a number of fish farms, hatcheries, and fish-culture stations, and that thousands of people would start work in the spring when the flood ran out—the last flood in the river's history.

They sat on talking for a long time until they were recalled by the blast of the evening boat.

"We'll meet in the spring, Zubov," Shchetinin said, rising, "and then you'll see what our people are capable of doing."

He squeezed Zubov's hand and went away, his heavy clouted boots pounding on the polished floor.

Vasili watched the vanishing blue smoke of the professor's cigarette, which he had left lying on the windowsill, and although low wintry clouds drifted past the window, his thoughts were already turning towards the spring.

A week later Vasili and Grunya left for Moscow.

About twenty people came to see them off at the jetty, among them Mosolov, Antropov, Yegor Ivanovich, Marfa with her son Vitya, Prokhorov, Tosya, Stepan, and Irina.

The steamboat *Molotov* was coming down the river. It was her last trip, for ice had already appeared on the river and navigation was closing down. The boat was held up at the lock and did not come alongside the landing-stage until nightfall.

Vasili slipped his arm into Grunya's and led her up the gangway. They stood on the deck with their backs to the wind and looked at the shore. The boat sounded the departure signal and the people ashore began to wave caps and kerchiefs.

Vasili cupped his hands over his mouth and shouted to Yegor Ivanovich: "Keep an eye on the under-ice fishing!"

Mosolov threw back the hood of his oilskins and shouted back: "Don't worry, Kirillovich! Everything will be in order. We'll all keep an eye on it. Hurry up and come back!"

The anchor-chains rattled. The ship's paddles slapped the dark water. White steam gushed with a hiss from somewhere in the side and drifted along the hull.

The high bluff, illuminated by a searchlight, slid slowly backwards.

6

Vasili and Grunya spent most of the winter in Moscow.

They were put up in a hostel on Verkhne-Krasnoselskaya Street near the huge building of the U.S.S.R. Sea Fishing and Oceanography Research Institute with its numerous studies, museums, and laboratories. The training courses were housed in the same premises.

Hundreds of fishery inspection officers had come to the courses from all over the country—from the Northern coast, Sakhalin, Kamchatka, and the Kuril Islands, from the Caspian, and the Caucasus. They attended lectures on fish-stock replenishment, compared notes at seminary classes, and studied in the libraries.

The city's great buildings, the endless streams of traffic, and the Moscow Underground made a deep impression on Vasili and Grunya. They felt the measured

rhythm of a vast and complicated life in which millions of people went efficiently about their manifold duties—driving trolley-buses and motor cars, teaching children, receiving foreign ambassadors, publishing newspapers, controlling street traffic, delivering groceries, cleaning snow from the roads and pavements—doing everything, in short, which enabled every one individually and all of them together to execute a single great and nationally important task.

“What crowds, Vasya!” Grunya cried delightedly as they strolled about Moscow’s streets. “You’d think it was the easiest thing to get lost here, as you would in a forest, but look what perfect order there is everywhere!”

There being no classes on Sundays, Vasili and Grunya spent the day sight-seeing, then had their dinner and went to the theatre. They lived in separate dormitories, and in the evenings Vasili would walk up and down the corridor, waiting impatiently for Grunya to change, and then they would go to the opera, to the Maly Theatre, or the Art Theatre.

At first Vasili thought that Grunya, being a country-bred girl, would feel awkward in Moscow, especially at the theatre among hundreds of strangers, all energetic vivacious city folk, who could not help noticing the wide-eyed wonder of this shy little country girl. His fears, however, were unfounded.

On the very first evening, when Vasili helped Grunya to take her coat off in the cloak-room of the Maly Theatre, his brows went up in surprise, and he stared at his young wife as if he had never seen her before. Grunya stood before a cheval-glass, patting her hair with such cool nonchalance, she slipped a tiny silk handkerchief into the sleeve of her immaculate blue costume with such an easy gesture, and walked into the brilliantly lighted hall with such a confident poise that Vasili could not restrain himself from laughing outright.

"What's the matter?" Grunya whispered.

"Well, I never!" he said, shaking his head.

"What?"

"Where did you pick all this up?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I didn't know my wife was like that."

She saw his meaning, blushed, and pinched his arm.

At the courses, Vasili followed all the proceedings with deep interest and attention. He made notes of all the lectures, often talked with his fellow-students, listened to accounts of their work, attended the laboratory, and succeeded in a short time in making the acquaintance of many research workers. He realized more and more as time went on that vast constructive work was in progress on all the numerous rivers, seas, and lakes of his country, where thousands of his comrades were solving problems of which people had never dreamed.

Vasili was deeply interested in a report made by an ichthyologist, still a young man, concerning the acclimatization of the Black Sea grey mullet in the Caspian Sea. The speaker, a short, ruddy-faced man in spectacles, gave a detailed matter-of-fact account of it as of a thing not only accomplished but also as having yielded the full practical results expected of it beforehand.

"About twenty years ago, when we first started this job, we had a good many opponents," the ichthyologist said. "Some maintained that the waters of the Caspian, with their high sulphate content, were unsuitable for grey mullet; others said that the fish would not find the necessary food in the Caspian, and still others feared it would oust the valuable Caspian food-fishes. But we carried out all the necessary experiments, received funds from the state and started work on transplantation. We caught grey mullet fry and yearlings off Novorossiisk, transferred them to vivariums and from there by well-

boats to a special railway car on soft springs. The car was hitched to a passenger train, and our emigrants set off on their journey to Makhach-Kala. They had to be looked after like babies during the journey, and so expert pisciculturists went with them all the way. At Makhach-Kala the car was shunted as near to the sea as possible, and the young fishes were released.

"We kept this up for four years. At the end of that time shoals of grey mullet were discovered off Krasnovodsk, and in another year we observed a mass colonization of our settlers in the south and middle Caspian. Of course, capture of the grey mullet was strictly prohibited for the time being. It wasn't until 1937 that Comrade Mikoyan, who was closely following these developments, gave permission for the first catch of grey mullet to be made at Kizil-Su in the Krasnovodsk bay. A team of twelve fishermen in boats went out to the fishing-grounds with a three-hundred-and-fifty-metre-long special sweep-seine and caught over six tons of grey mullet in the shallower parts. They saw immense shoals of it farther out to sea.

"Our task was completed. We had settled a new valuable fish in the Caspian Sea. Lately as much as ten million rubles' worth of grey mullet has been landed in the Caspian, but much more could be taken if more intensive fishing were organized. To-day the Caspian teems with grey mullet. Shoals of it run from Mangishlak to the bay of Gasan-Kuli, and from Chechen Island to Astara. It has been reported that fishery inspection launches, patrolling the sea in calm weather, have sailed for hours at a stretch over immense shoals of grey mullet. The pisciculturists have done their part of the job. It's now up to the fisheries to do theirs."

Vasili hung on the speaker's lips, afraid to miss a word, and in the evening he told Grunya about it.

"That's real work!" he cried enthusiastically. "Exact

prognostication and thoroughly planned experiments combined with devilish patience, and cast-iron confidence in what you're doing!"

The large dormitory accommodated several fishery inspectors, most of them elderly men with a long work record and experience. Vasili took a particular liking to an inspector by the name of Ivan Korneyevich Larionov, a lean old man with a dark weather-beaten face, who always had a short "nose-warmer" of a pipe in his teeth.

Larionov had knocked about the north-eastern parts of the country for thirty years. He had lived on Taimyr, crossed the Stanovoi Range, walked from the Khatanga to the mouth of the Lena. He had shot seals and sea lions with a group of hunters, had been mauled by bears, and had all but frozen to death in the snowy wastes on several occasions.

In the evenings, when the inspectors gathered in the room after classes were over, Larionov would launch on endless yarns about his wanderings in the North.

The air was blue with tobacco smoke, the men lay on their cots exchanging a desultory word or two, while the little old man leisurely described the rugged beauty of the Far North, spoke about dog teams, dried fish, and encounters in the taiga, and all his stories were like tales of thrilling fiction.

"An interesting job, ours is," Larionov said with a chuckle. "Nothing to beat it. Air, water, sunshine! No offices, desks, ledgers, or filing cabinets—just the wide open spaces. Do what you like, go where you like. Especially in the outlying regions. It's just paradise there! Immense tracts of land, impenetrable taiga with wild beasts, thousands of miles of tundra, snow, with the dogs dashing over it like mad. . . ."

Listening to Larionov, Vasili envied him for having seen and experienced so much. At the same time Vasili noticed that the old inspector was talkative enough when

describing the hard fight against crafty poachers, clashes with smugglers, and his adventures in the icy wastes of the North, but as soon as the question of fish-stock replenishment was brought up he would begin to yawn, and in half an hour would be snoring peacefully on his bed in the corner.

One day Vasili told his room-mates about Shchetinin's expedition, the building of the fish hatchery, and their plans for stocking the new reservoirs in the arid steppes with fish.

Larionov, who was sitting at the table, snorted mockingly.

"What do you want it for?" he said, narrowing his sharp eyes.

"What?" Vasili said, uncomprehending.

"All that fuss and bother—reproduction, replenishment, projects?"

He stretched his legs out lazily and admired his camel-hair socks.

"Is that your business? In my opinion an inspection officer ought to justify his name, guard his area, and not go in for fish-breeding experiments. They're two different tasks and shouldn't be confused."

"Just a minute," Vasili protested. "In your opinion then, the fishery inspector should confine himself to inspection and remain just a passive observer?"

"Not quite," Larionov said. "Inspection and observation are not one and the same thing. You can hardly say that a sentinel on duty is passive. To my way of thinking the inspection officer should be just such an incorruptible sentinel. He shouldn't meddle in other business and have anything to do with people who are likely to throw him off his main job."

Seeing Vasili's exasperated smile, Larionov got up and began to pace the room excitedly, waving his pipe and shouting:

"Don't you see you've broken the sentinel's first commandment—not to associate with strangers! It's your duty as a soldier to be vigilant, and you are forbidden to do anything that will distract your attention. But you've got yourself mixed up in some construction or other and have forgotten your duties as a sentinel. You've become a pisciculturist, a political worker, a lecturer, anything but an officer of the fishery inspection!"

"No, Ivan Korneyevich," Vasili said, jumping up, too, and speaking in an angry tone, "it's you obviously who have remained the sportsman-inspector you always were, whose only pleasure is to fight the poachers——"

"Yes!" the old man interrupted defiantly. "I'm proud to say that not a single poacher has ever escaped me. And mind you, young man, I caught them in places a cut above that Zamanukha puddle of yours! I chased them for weeks in a boat, hunted them in the snows, tracked them to god-forsaken places in secret hide-outs. I vied with them in dexterity, courage, endurance, and devilish cunning. I never let them out of my sight, pitted my wits against theirs, and then caught them red-handed and punished them mercilessly! And mark you, I had neither friends nor foes among them, neither sympathies nor antipathies. I was just Nemesis to them."

"Why do you speak of all this in the past tense, Ivan Korneyevich?" Vasili asked mockingly. "Chased, hunted, tracked, punished. I suppose your poachers have disappeared or fizzled out?"

"Yes, young man," Larionov sighed. "They've grown very scarce in recent years, and believe it or not, I'm getting lazy . . . have lost interest in the thing."

The men lying on their beds burst out laughing.

Vasili laughed too. "You're an incorrigible romantic, I see, Ivan Korneyevich," he said. "I know all this only from books. Shrimpers, oyster pirates in yellow neck-cloths, captive harpies bound with ropes—all this has

been described by an admirable inspector of fisheries by the name of Jack London. But that's a thing of the remote past. To be sure, we still have poachers and we're fighting them, but they don't count these days. Believe me, there's more romance in fish hatcheries, in breeding new food-fishes, and in the stocking of steppe reservoirs than there is in the yellow neckcloths of oyster pirates!"

"Don't try to make me out a schoolboy!" Larionov said with a scornful gesture. "I've grown out of that, my friend. It seems to me you've got a wrong idea about what an inspector should be, and that's why you meddle with things that don't concern you——"

"I think Zubov is right," interposed a swarthy inspection officer from Ossetia named Mamsurov. "Zubov deals with the question the Soviet way and we could do no better than follow his example."

"It's being done in other districts, too," flung in one of the inspectors.

"Yes, but not the proper way! We've got to tackle the job seriously."

Thus the evenings passed in fierce disputes, and everyone noticed that Larionov was beginning to yield his ground. The men's vigorous attacks and Zubov's cheerful pertinacity conquered him.

Chancing to meet Vasili and Grunya in the street one day, he greeted them affably, and asked, with a look at Grunya: "Your wife?"

"Yes," Vasili answered. "She's a pisciculturist in the fishing kolkhoz."

Larionov glanced at Grunya in her white fur-coat and knitted mittens and winked to Vasili. "Now I understand why you're so interested in pisciculture."

He smiled, then added with embarrassment: "Jokes aside, I believe you've converted the old codger. True, we have quite different conditions in the North, but—on the whole—yes, I think you're right."

Zubov attended laboratory at the Sea Fishing and Oceanography Research Institute where he made the acquaintance of the post-graduate of whom Shchetinin had told him, the one who had been engaged for several years on the important problem of the artificial breeding of belugas. She showed him specimens of beluga fry which she had reared, and he examined with interest the larvae distributed in test tubes and the baby belugas submerged in transparent cylinders with formalin.

"Why are they different colours?" Vasili asked. "Some have darker spines, others lighter."

"Evidently that depends on the nature of the food," the woman said. "We knew practically nothing about the kind of food beluga fry required, and so we had to make up a very complicated diet for them, including fish hash."

"How did you go about it?"

"We got the beluga eggs from a pituitary-treated spawner in the lower reaches of the Don, fertilized them, and put them into apparatuses for incubating. Mass hatching of the larvae began after eight days. We delivered them by plane to the Fish Husbandry Station at Saratov, put them into aquariums with running water, and started observations."

Zubov noticed nothing remarkable about his interlocutor at first. She was a genial, modest Russian woman who, if she spoke about herself, did so unwillingly and shyly, but the importance of what she had done amazed Vasili.

"The problem of beluga-breeding, then, has been solved?" he asked.

"On the whole, yes," she answered. "There are still a few loose ends. In any case we'll save the belugas from extinction."

"No small credit for this is due to your teacher, Professor Shchetinin," she added with a smile. "His work is very important, especially now, when the problem of

mass breeding of belugas is in its final stage of solution."

In the same laboratory Vasili made the acquaintance of another research worker, a thin little woman muffled up in a woollen shawl, who had recently completed some interesting experiments in rearing white salmon young in ponds, and afterwards started to rear them together with carps, achieving a remarkable combination for the stocking of the kolkhoz reservoirs.

"You see," she told Vasili, "the white salmon feeds on mongrel fish which consume the same food as the carp. Now that the problem of joint breeding has been solved, the kolkhozes will get much more carp out of their fish ponds than they have been getting...."

The lectures which Vasili and Grunya attended brought home to them more and more the tremendous scope of the country's fish husbandry. It seemed to them as they looked at the map with coloured little flags denoting the Soviet fisheries that they were standing on the summit of the world's highest mountain, seeing everything the fishermen were doing from the Pacific to the Caspian, and from snowy Spitzbergen to their native Don.

They saw all the fourteen seas washing the coasts of their Motherland, the hundreds of thousands of miles of rivers, the millions of acres of lakes, the thousands of fishing-craft, large and small, sailing the seas and oceans under the Soviet flag.

Standing by the map they visualized the whale pastures of the Antarctic, and the crews of the Soviet whaling-fleet harpooning cachalots, fin-backs, and blue whales and melting thousands of tons of blubber; Soviet trawlers catching cods and hakes in the Barents Sea; a multitude of storm-hardened fishermen catching fish off the coasts of Kamchatka, Sakhalin, and the Kuril Islands, in the Aral Sea. They could imagine the airmen of the fishery reconnaissance sighting shoals of herring by the dark-

grey patches in the depths of the water, families of seals by the black dots on the pack-ice, and schools of sardines by the long smoke-grey streaks on the surface of the water.

Studying the museums and scientific cabinets, Vasili and Grunya clearly perceived what an amazingly high level of technique had been achieved in the fishing industry. They saw models of hundreds of splendid machines and apparatuses—electrically driven mobile ice-crushers; hydro-elevators and fish pumps; belt conveyors; tractor winches for nets; fish salting, cooling, and freezing machinery; smoke generators; fish-cleaning machines; automatic fish packers; sonic depth finders; roasting furnaces for canneries; fish sorting and dressing machines—a multitude of light and heavy machines created by Soviet science for the country's fish industry.

Staggered by the stupendous scope of what they saw, Vasili and his wife thought wistfully of their little stanitsa lost amid the steppes and flood meadows, and it seemed to them from here a barely visible speck.

"Yes, Vasya," sighed Grunya, "our stanitsa is as nothing compared to this."

"Yes..." Vasili murmured reflectively.

But while thinking of the scope of the fish industry and the nature of the different off-shore and in-shore fisheries, Zubov realized that the remote floating stanitsa with its people, its fishing-places, its wherries and seine-boats, its curing-shop, jetty, and spawning-grounds was a particle of this great whole.

He realized that it was the thousands of these seemingly inconspicuous stanitsas and hamlets, villages and farmsteads scattered over the Volga and the Don, the Kuban and the Dnieper, the Amur and the Ural, the Kura, the Yenisei, and other numerous rivers of the Soviet land that comprised the in-shore fisheries and gave the people millions of tons of the choicest food-fishes every year.

"No, my dear," he said to Grunya with conviction, "our stanitsa means something too. There are many more like us. Very many. And if Golubovskaya, then Sudachi, then a third, a fifth, a twentieth, and hundreds more reorganize their work and start breeding fish in regular style, you'll see what they can do!"

"D'you know, Vasya, I'm beginning to miss the stanitsa," Grunya confessed. "There's snow all over the flood meadow now . . . wolves prowling about our little house. Antropov is setting fish traps in the ice holes. . . ."

"Never mind, Grunya," Vasili reassured her, "time flies quickly, we'll soon be home again. Things are not going too well with our fishermen, you know."

"Why?" Grunya said, looking up swiftly.

"There's some hitch with the plan."

Vasili had learned from papers and the villagers' letters that many fisheries of the Don basin had not fulfilled the annual catch plan and were listed among the backward. At the regional Party conference the Secretary of the Regional Party Committee had reproached the fishermen for catching ever less fish of the valuable market varieties, such as breams, carps, herrings, and sturgeons, and filling the gap with cheap anchovies and *khamsa*.

Antropov and Mosolov had written Vasili a letter in which they told him that some of the fisheries downstream had fulfilled the quarterly plan in two months by only thirty per cent.

"Our kolkhoz is behindhand, too," Mosolov had sadly confessed. "The Sudachi folk have won first place, and it doesn't look as if we'll catch up with them soon."

Vasili cudgelled his brains as to the cause of this failure. He knew that other people, too, were seeking these causes and discovered them in facts, which, although important in themselves, were not the main reason. The unorganized turn-out of the fishermen during

the season, the absence of under-ice fishing, faulty planning of the fish catch, wrong distribution of nets, ineffective use of the technical equipment, demurrage, untimely repairs, low work discipline at some of the fisheries—all these reasons no doubt affected the landings and, as Zubov knew, were constantly cited in reports, memorandums, and minutes.

Zubov had often attended conferences and meetings and had heard the fishermen, team-leaders, workers of the motor-fishing stations and members of the Trust staff complain:

“We’re not given permanent fishing-grounds to work.”

“We have no tow-lines and anchor-chains.”

“Strengthen discipline!”

“Give us tarpaulins for tents!”

“We’ve run out of salt.”

“We missed the time for preparing ice.”

“The whole business of tackle must be revised.”

These were important things, of course, and people did right to speak about them. But Zubov found himself thinking it was high time to speak about the main thing, the fundamental and decisive factor, namely, the socialist, creative, Michurinist principle of conducting fish husbandry, the planned raising of “fish crops,” extensive measures providing for fish reproduction, stringent observance of the laws regulating fishing, and the protection of fish stocks—in other words, all that was most vital for sharply raising the fish supply.

Zubov recalled with a sad smile how, at one conference he had attended, the chairman of a downstream fishing kolkhoz had accounted for his failure to fulfil the catch plan by the fact that the camps at the fishing-grounds had no fire-extinguishers.

“No, my dear,” Zubov said to his wife, “we’ve got to tackle the job seriously. And not just at one kolkhoz

hatchery with outdated apparatuses, but all along the river."

He took a turn about the room, listening to the steady throb of the traffic outside the window.

"I'm working on a scheme for developing our lakes in the flood meadows. At present they're just waste reservoirs overgrown with reeds and rushes, full of almost worthless mongrel fishes—perches, roaches, and gudgeons. We'll tackle those lakes in the spring—start breeding carps and white salmon in them. We'll pledge ourselves to raise the young of valuable food-fishes at our hatchery and plant them out in the ponds of the steppe collective farms."

Vasili bent down and put his arm about his wife.

"We'll have lots of work to do, darling," he said. "And if we both realize that we're doing our bit towards the fulfilment of a great task, we'll be happy."

They returned home early in the spring.

The snow on the fields was dark and soggy. On the river the ice-drift had already begun, but navigation had not been reopened yet, and the Zubovs were obliged to travel by rail.

Grandpa Shrimp drove them home from the station. He urged the chestnut mares on with a flick of the reins, while he retailed the latest stanitsa news.

"Stepan Khudyakov has married the buoy-keeper's daughter. They got married soon after you left. Kuzma Fedorovich's got an addition to the family—his old woman bore him a son. Old Yona died. Just on Christmas Eve. Big funeral, all the stanitsa came. His children and grandchildren flocked down—crowds of them. Old Yona had seven sons, you know, and five or six daughters."

Thaw water trickled from under the snow and gushed down the steppe mounds, sparkling in the sunshine. Faint wisps of vapour curled over the little wooden foot-bridges

and the dark patches of warmed earth. Clucking hens fussed around dung-hills on the outskirts of the roadside farmsteads.

Grandpa Shrimp stuck the whip into the top of his boot and turned to Zubov. "Come to think of it, it's over a year since I first drove you down to Golubovskaya," he said. "Yes, of course, over a year. I remember you freezing in those light boots of yours and asking whether we still had a long way to go."

"Yes, Yerofei Kuprianovich, it's over a year," Vasili said meditatively. "A lot of water has flowed under the bridge since then."

"Aye, that it has," the old man concurred.

Vasili stroked Grunya's hand while he recalled his arrival in the stanitsa, the white river with its dark strip of sledge-track, his meeting with Grunya, the warm nights, the camp-fires on the bank, his talks with Antropov, and the merry work on the green flood meadow. He thought of all he had accomplished that year and of what he still had to do.

They arrived in the stanitsa before nightfall, and at once that familiar feeling of joyous oneness with everything that took place on the river gripped them.

Fishing was going on all round the clock. The tarred fishing-boats, describing a semicircle, sped down the left bank of the river and nimble hands payed out the net. The winches mounted on the bank set up a rhythmic clatter. Girls in rubber overalls hurriedly extricated the fishes out of the meshes, stowed them away in baskets, and carried them over to the waiting barges.

"We're fishing, Kirillovich, fishing!" Mosolov cried, catching sight of Zubov from afar. "We're going to work in new style now! No lagging. We're going to fight for first place. The fishermen are at it day and night. You know our folks! Even Pimen Talalayev is becoming a new man—Arkhip Ivanovich has put some sense in his head!"

The next morning Vasili and Grunya started work—he with Yegor Ivanovich on the river and lakes, she with the newly organized pisciculture team at the kolkhoz hatchery built in the autumn. They practically saw nothing of each other all day, and came home to their little house on the island when the blue shadows of spring twilight deepened over the river.

The days flew past in hard work. The sun grew hotter every day, and the trees began to bud. The last of the migratory birds had returned home from the remote South. Hosts of fish started on their spawning-run.

In a few more days the spring close-season was to come into force.

Mosolov and Antropov—the latter had recently returned from upstream—were in a hurry to fulfil the monthly plan. Nearly all the stanitsa lived at the fishing-grounds those days.

"We shan't manage it," Mosolov fretted, scanning the progress report. "If only we had an extra two or three days. . . ."

"Saturday night's the last, Kuzma Fedorovich," Vasili reminded him. "Punctually at twelve midnight there shouldn't be a single net left on the river."

Mosolov tried to laugh it off. "The fishermen don't wear watches at work, they don't know whether it's twelve or one o'clock."

"I've seen to that," Vasili said gravely. "At twelve o'clock sharp the lock master will give three signals with all the lock lights. After the last signal the whole river must be cleared for the spawning fish."

On Saturday the fishing teams worked without a moment's rest.

Night was approaching. Mosolov's progress report showed 99.6 per cent.

"If we fished till morning we'd just about do it," Mosolov said, looking up at Zubov with eyes bleary from

lack of sleep. They were standing on the bank. Zubov put his hand on the chairman's shoulder.

"Do you really want to go on fishing till morning?"

Mosolov's silence lasted only several seconds, then he gripped Vasili's hand and said softly: "No, I don't. We *are* just a bit short of the plan, but that's our fault. No, we won't violate the prohibition."

The twinkling stars were reflected in the darkening river. Barges creaked unseen near the left bank. Lower down, by the jetty, the loading-gear of a launch taking on fish could be heard working with a steady rattle. A buoy bobbed at the bend of the river, throwing a red sliver of light across the water.

Punctually at midnight all the lock lights, including those on the signal masts and in the windows of the houses, blinked three times.

The fishermen on the river suspended work.

Vasili, Grunya, Mosolov, and Antropov got into a boat and rowed out to the masonry dam to watch the running fish.

"I've been upstream and have seen our belugas thrashing the water at the spawning-grounds," Antropov said. "We ought to send the professor a wire and cheer the old man up."

They stood on the dam till daybreak. And when the sun rose, it seemed to them as if the whole stanitsa with its houses, its blossoming gardens, and the people standing about near the fishing-boats was sailing majestically into the infinite blue spaces bathed in mellow sunshine.

A F T E R W O R D

Vitali Zakrutkin in *Floating Stanitsa* gives us the story of life in a collective fishery on the Don in the early years after the war. Since the events described in this book many changes have taken place in the life of the Don fishermen.

Professor Shchetinin, one of the characters of V. Zakrutkin's novel, dreamt of a time when "the fish will fly by air to any place we want it to." To-day, with transport planes flying across the Caspian carrying the fertilized spawn of the sturgeon to the Aral Sea, that dream has become a reality. Sturgeons, which were formerly total strangers in the Aral Sea, are now being caught there in large numbers.

Professor Shchetinin experimented in transplanting belugas across the dam by means of well-boats. To-day an electrically driven fish hoist, designed by Soviet engineers and pisciculturists, has been built at the Tsimlyanskaya hydraulic works. Fishes, including the beluga and other ganoids, enter a specially arranged canal where they are automatically raised by the fish hoist and lowered into the man-made Tsimlyanskaya Sea.

Zakrutkin describes the setting up of a small fish hatchery in Golubovskaya Stanitsa. Big industrial enterprises—fish hatcheries and fish-breeding farms—have been built on the Don and still more are under construction. From here hundreds of millions of artificially bred fry of the beluga, the sturgeon, the bream, herring, pike-perch, and other food-fishes will be let out into the Don. The fish stocks of the Azov Sea will be preserved and considerably replenished.

The author has shown the new mental attitude gaining ground among the kolkhoz fishermen, who are made to realize that the old wasteful methods of carrying on fish husbandry are a thing of the past. This new attitude on the part of Soviet fishermen will strike deeper root with the steady improvement in the methods of fish husbandry, in which important progress has already been made.